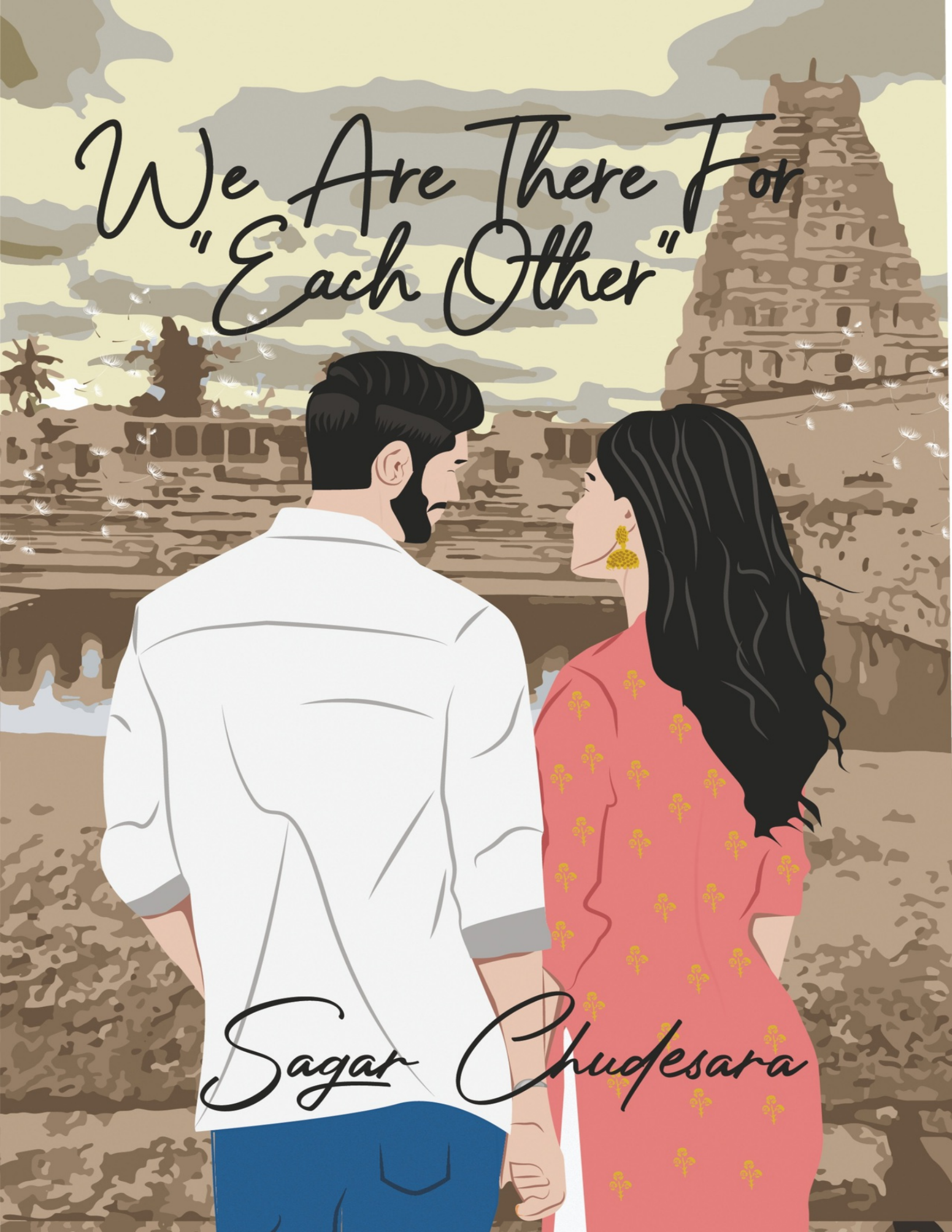
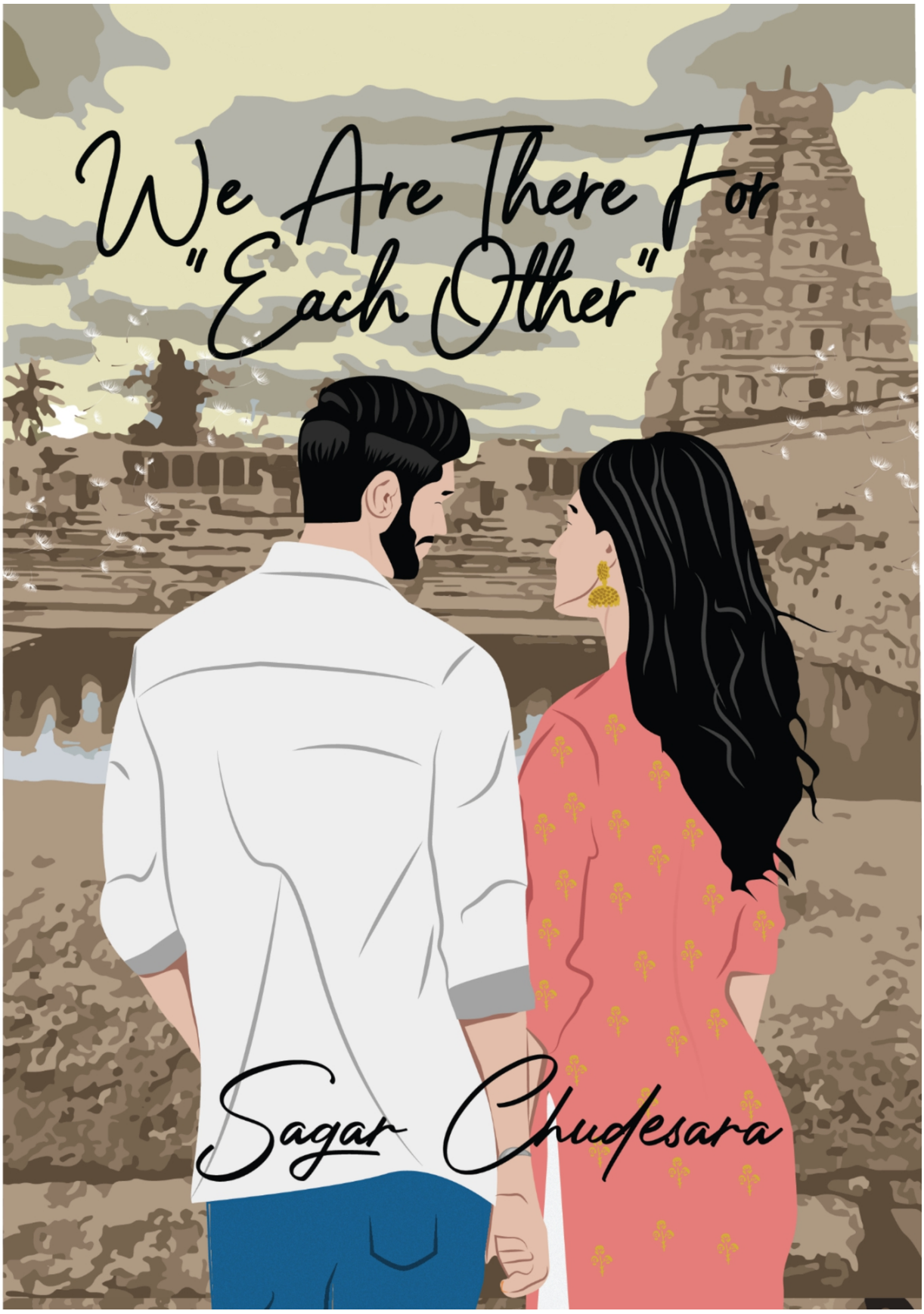

We Are There For "Each Other"
Sagar Chudesara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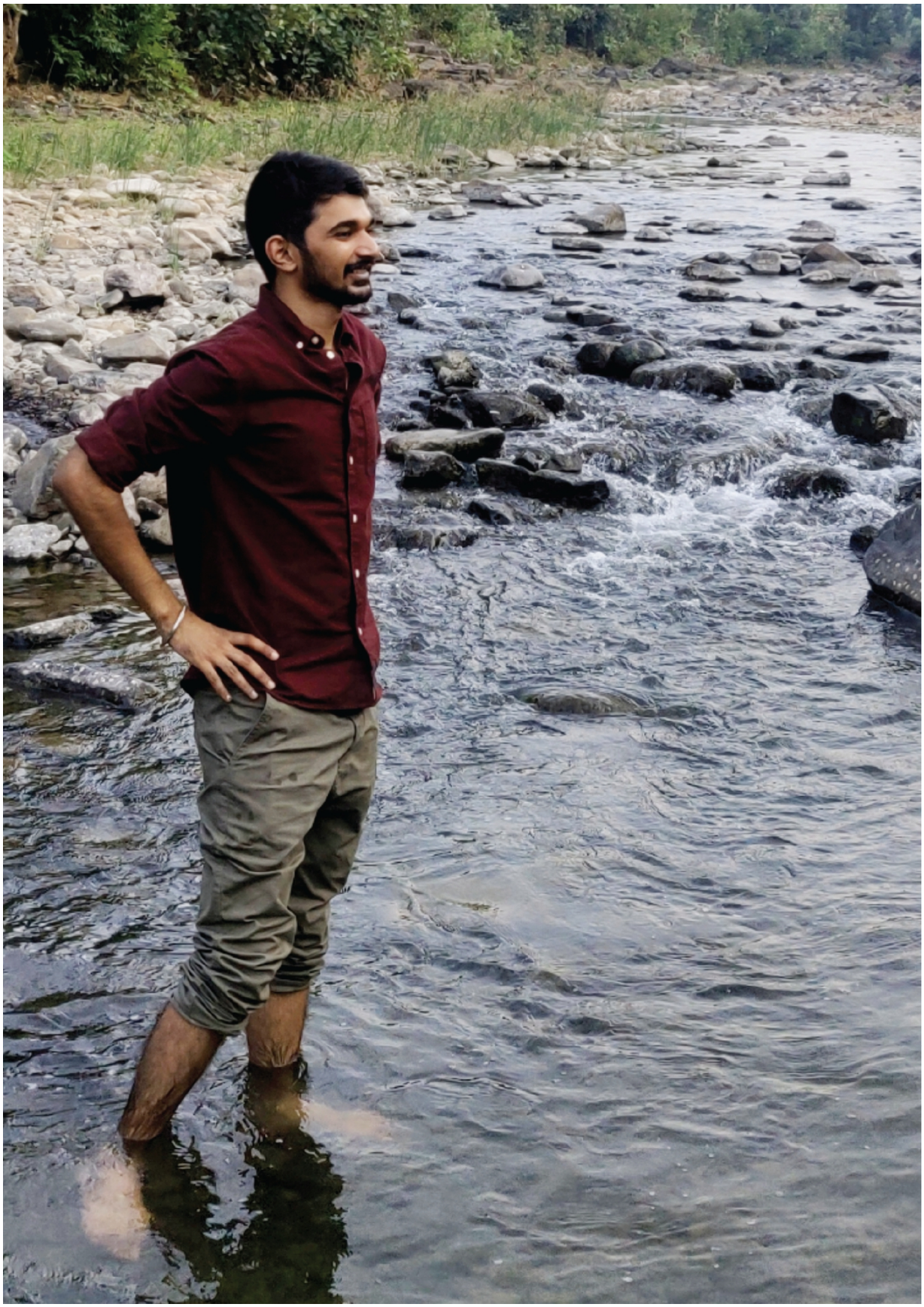

About the Author

Hey Guys, Welcome to my Debut Book, We are There for Each other. The Person you see on the Backside of the book is Me and My Name is Sagar Chudesara. I am from Mumbai and I am 24 years Old. My Birthday is on 30th November (I am mentioning this here because you guys can wish me on my Birthday, Lol). It feels quite awkward to write about myself here but I will try to write a bit. Of Course I buy and read lots of Books and try to write a few. I have this habit that Whenever I visit a New City or Town, I always buy a book from there because that book stays with me like a memory.

I am a South Indian Movies Enthusiast and I have seen most of the famous and well made Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu and Kannada Movies and I highly recommend you all to watch South Indian Movies because that's where the best movies in our Country are created.

I go on Road Trips to many Places Across India like Vadodara, Udaipur, Jaipur, Delhi, Chandigarh, Himachal, Rishikesh, Hampi etc and someday I wish to shift permanently to some quiet place in Gujarat.

In my Free Time, I go on my Building Terrace and talk with my friends and that's where I feel complete. Also, I hit the gym regularly and you will also find me Meditating.

To know more about me, You can connect with me on:
Instagram @sagarkibaatein (I reply to everyone personally)

You can also Join my Official Book Group on Facebook:
Group name is We are there for Each other by Sagar Chudesara

I have also created a Channel on Telegram, t.me/wearethereforeachother

We Are There For “Each Other”

Sagar Chudesara

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ISBN: 978-93-90465-01-9 (Paperback)

PSIN: 91-2730-1406-0-02

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Printed, Published & Bound by
Sagar Chudesara.

First printing edition 2020.

Sagar Chudesara
Malad East,

Mumbai - 400 097.

This Book is Dedicated to My Parents,
Who are not perfect at all but they never failed in Making me a Better Person.
Thank you Mummy and Papa….!

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgements, and a Note for My Readers

In this Ever Growing World of Social Media and Constant Information Bombaring where people don’t have time to even look into the eyes of their Loved Ones, it takes a lot of heart and passion to read a book. So First of all thank you to you, My Reader. **Tum ho to Hum Hain and I Love you.**

Writing a Book is a Journey which changed me as a person Completely. This Journey wouldn’t have been possible without few people and certain Inspirations; Here I am Thanking Each of them:

I am Thankful to:
The Universe, The Plants, The Fresh Air, The Sea, The Mountains, The Chai, A.R Rahman Music and You

My Parents, who always gave me the Freedom to Express Myself and kept me Grounded. Who took me to various Road Trips and Never Said me “No” when I bought so many books.
I might write a story about them someday for sure.

My Younger Brother Shubh, for always being there for me, clicking so many of my good pictures and now also supporting me as my Business partner.

My Guru, Mr Sandeep Maheshwari, who took me from Darkness towards Light.

My Friend, Mansi Patel. Without Mansi, this book wouldn’t have been possible, because she was the one who typed this book from my Four HandWritten Diaries (Sorry for my Bad HandWriting, Mansi)

My Friend, Shaily Padia for always being there for me and directly or indirectly, Many conversions of us on the Terrace, became inspirations behind this book.

My Friend, Mr Vishal Sadhariya with whom I can share my deepest fears and insecurities. You are like a big brother in my life who always guides me towards the right path.

My Friend, Dr Meera Nagaria, who helped me a lot during the initial research behind this book.

My Hyderabadi Friend, Prathyusha Salva who was my initial reader and gave me lots of confidence. Cheers to all our talks based on South movies and Books.

Mr Alphonso Puthern, Writer and Director of Malayalam Movie Premam. This movie changed my life and made me a better writer for sure. I am waiting for your next movie sir.

Sai Pallavi Ma'am, if you are reading this, I want to let you know that I am your Biggest Fan and thank you for Creating Malar in Premam Movie.

Also Super Grateful to my Friends and Well Wishers: Harsh Kubadia, Mehul Thakkar, Nainy Katyal, Darshit Gupta, Aditi Sanghvi, Jaideep Goud, Prachi Jagtap, Mayank Jain, My Cricket Group (Swapnil Bhai, Keyur Bhai, Chetan Uncle, Yash, Kunal, Jayant, Arjun), My Gym Trainers (Austin Sir and Umesh Sir)

My Cover Designer, Mukund for creating such a wonderful Cover. You guys can follow him on Instagram @__.dot2details.__

I am sorry if I have missed any names. Once Again Thank you to Everyone who turned my dream into a Reality. *Chaliye Bhagwaan Ka Naam Lekar Shuru Karte Hain Kahaani…..*

Agar Aap Apni Kahani Ke Ram aur Sita Na Ban Paaye to Chalega,
Lekin aur ki Kahani ke Hanuman Jarur Banna Kyuki
Hanuman ke Bina, Ram aur Sita ki Kahaani bhi Adhuri Rehti.

Jai Bolo Hanuman Ki..!

Chapter 1

15 Nov 2018,
Malad East,
Mumbai - 097

Love and friendship are the secret ingredients to make any story great. So first, let's start with friendship.

Malar and Sagar.

This story wouldn't have begun if they were not born in the same building, Ganesh Bhuvan Housing Society, precisely 24 years ago. Malar was born first, in 1994 in the A-wing of the building, and two years later, in 1996, Sagar was born in the B-wing of the building.

Now, 24 years later, Malar and Sagar are friends, and the best thing about their relationship is that they are genuine with each other. There is no contradiction or confusion between them. They both exactly know what they mean to each other, and never try to change each other when they are together on their building terrace.

The building terrace plays the hero to Malar and Sagar, and it is the hero of our story too. That day they are supposed to meet there.

It was 6 p.m.

Sagar received Malar's text.

"How much time will you take? I am already upstairs?"

Sagar read the message but didn't reply. Instead, he got out of his house and reached the terrace in the next 129 seconds.

Malar stood in the corner and looked down at how rickshaws, bikes, cars, buses, and humans were just running.

"I don't want to run anymore in life."

Sagar just went and stood next to her. They both didn't speak anything for the next few minutes. They just let their eyes do the talking.

15 minutes passed, and for the first time in the history of their friendship, awkwardness took space between them. Without saying a word, they went and sat next to each other on the water tank of their terrace. From there, they could only see the sun going down.

Malar knew she had to start the conversation that day. The sun had set; the sky had turned a mix of orange and blue. Birds were returning to their trees, and amidst this, Malar asked, "What was her answer..?"

Sagar was waiting for her to ask that question. He looked at her and said, "She said she didn't expect such a thing from me. She saw me just as a friend, and nothing could ever happen between us. She also requested me to end all this; otherwise, she would tell everything to Rupali didi."

Malar expected such a reply because it was apparent. She said, "I told you. It was way too early to send her such a love letter".

Sagar got furious and in a loud voice explained, "See Malar, Nothing can be done now, the letter has already been sent, and she has replied to it. So please don't tell me whether it is too early or too late."

Malar raised her voice now, "If you think that way then forget about her and move on. You can't force someone to love you. Got it?"

"Malar, it's effortless for you to say all this because you have Nimit who loved you every day for the past seven years. But with me it's different. I had been searching for the girl I loved in college. It took me five years to move on from her and fall in love with Devaki, but even she rejected me plainly."

"Sagar, what happened in college with your girlfriend was beyond your control. In fact, you can't control whether Devaki will accept your love or not, such things are not in our control."

Sagar couldn't argue further because what Malar said was 100 percent right. They both became silent again.

Malar also needed to accept what she said a few minutes ago. She needed to practice what she preached, "We can't control such things." She knew she couldn't control what was happening in her life for the past one year.

She took a deep breath and broke the news to Sagar.

"I broke up with Nimit last month."

By now, the sky was completely black, and it was dark all around. But somewhere in the corner between the clouds, the moon in its most excellent form, smiled, looking at Sagar and Malar.

Chapter 2

Without destruction, there is no creation. You can't build a new multi-story tower without demolishing the old structure, which had cracks all over it. Heartbreak, health problems, long-distance relationship, death, destruction are crucial; otherwise, our story and the story of this entire planet would become boring and repetitive. We don't want that, right?

To know why Sagar got rejected and why he sent that letter, we need to travel back to the moment from where Sagar's story began.

It was on the first day of the 2nd year of junior college when Sagar saw Priya for the first time. It happened outside their classroom, and thanks to the effect that Bollywood movies had on Sagar, he just couldn't get her out of his brain and heart.

Priya had this little gap between her front two teeth. Sagar found it really cute. Priya had the rough curly hair, and Sagar wanted to run his fingers through her hair. She was the first bencher, and Sagar was the last bencher.

Now I will not bore you by narrating how they both came close. Sagar and Priya came closer the same way two young college-going students fall in love. For them, the difference between lust and love is very little. Within a month after their first meeting, frontbencher Priya became a last bencher.

Their days were spent bunking college lectures and going to the nearest Gelato Ice-cream parlor on the 1st of every month. As on the 1st of every month, Gelato offered the flavor of the month.

Their days were spent reading erotic novels sitting next to each other in the canteen while eating cheap fried rice.

Their days were spent holding hands on rainy days.

They shared their first kiss just after Sagar proposed to Priya by saying, "I want to spend the rest of my life reading books and eating Gelato Ice-cream with you. Will you be my partner?"

From that point, there was no looking back. Sagar and Priya first made out on a sunny day sitting back on a Rickshaw. It started with a kiss, and then their hands were all over each other. The rickshaw reached its destination, but the lovemaking remained.

After reaching their respective houses, Sagar and Priya directly went to the washroom, pulled their pants down, plugged their earphones, and skyped each other. Soon they masturbated, looking into each other's eyes. Sagar came first, and Priya followed him shortly.
Both smiled, looking at each other's climax. That day they lost their mental virginity.
The best thing about young love is that there is no holding back yourself physically and emotionally.
During their canteen conversations, they let each other know their secrets. Sagar shared with Priya how he didn't like his skinny body at times. Priya shared the unbearable pain she experienced when her mother used to take her for bikini wax just because she used to think that girls should not grow hair anywhere. Sagar felt the pressure to do something big in his life because his parents were highly successful, and Priya's brother was given more privileges in their house because he was a boy. Sagar had stretch marks on his butts, and Priya was forced to sleep in the storeroom during her periods because, in her religion, it was not allowed to touch Idols or enter into the kitchen when she is bleeding.
It was Priya's 17th birthday. Sagar brought black earphones for her. They both were looking into each other's eyes, sitting on the last bench. The final lecture got over. Priya said, "My parents and brother are out of town." Sagar winked at her.
They both got up from the last bench and headed out. As they reached near the class door, Priya's ID card fell down from her hand. Sagar picked it up and put it back around Priya's neck. While placing the ID card, their bodies were so close that Sagar's chest and Priya's breasts touched each other. They kept looking at each other's lips, and the distance between them was melting.
A loud female voice broke their trance.
"What are you both doing in the college premises?"
Sagar instantly became aware of the situation. Fear gripped him, and he ran to save himself. He forgot to hold Priya's hand while running away.
Teacher caught Priya, and the irony is that she read Priya’s details from her ID card.

Chapter 3

Five years later (2018)
There are no answers to some questions in life. There is no answer to why people cut cakes on Birthdays. Everyone is doing it; that's why people follow suit.

There is no answer to why people click photos before eating and send it to everyone on snap chat.

Also, there is no answer to why Sagar tried to put that ID card across Priya's neck five years ago.

After that day, Sagar never saw Priya again, and it took him five years to recover from her absence.

The teacher had informed Priya's parents. And the next day, her leaving certificate was issued. Sagar went to locate her in her building, but the watchman told him that her family had left for Gujarat. Her phone was switched off, and her Facebook account was deactivated.

When we learn to swim, a float is given to us so that we don't drown. Priya was that float for Sagar. He was learning to swim in the river of life with her help. But one day, that float vanished suddenly, and Sagar was left drowning. Sagar went to college just for Priya. He, too, left the college and joined his parent's Beauty Parlor Business.

In reality, Sagar was not interested in Commerce and also didn't know any shit about it. He had opted for Commerce randomly because everyone around him told him to do so. After Priya left, Sagar realized it was best to leave college and start earning money. *If Sagar had not left college, this story would have never been written.*
Five years passed, Sagar worked hard with his parents and earned a lot of money, and his heart too healed eventually. He deleted all the chats and photos that he and Priya had shared. It was a full stop for him. But the best thing that had happened in the last five years was that he reconnected with Malar and Harsh.

Malar and Sagar grew up together in the same building playing outdoor games like Stop and Party, Lagori, Badminton, Dog and the Bone that has nowadays been replaced by Candy Crush, PUBG, and Instagram.

People who left this planet have said that friends who grow up together sharing sweat, laughter, pimples, and puberty can never drift apart. The

same was the case with Sagar and Malar.

Despite their lack of contact after they completed school, the ice between them broke in minutes once they met on the terrace. Sagar told her everything about Priya. Malar helped him heal. They both met every weekend on the terrace to watch the sunset and drink tea made by Malar. She was Sagar’s support, and Sagar was her pillion.

On the other hand, Sagar also reconnected with his school buddy, Harsh.

Harsh and Sagar spent their early years of teenage playing cricket. They both studied in the same school and class and used to sit together on the last bench talking about their favorite cricketer M.S. Dhoni, their crushes, and torrents from where they could download free movies and H.D. porn clips.

We all search for just one friend with whom we can just be who we are. Harsh was that person for Sagar.

After Passing the 10th Board Exams, Harsh and his family shifted to Vasai from Malad, and his communication with Sagar became less and less with every day. They didn’t forget each other but were just occupied in their individual lives.

Last year in 2017, Sagar received a Whatsapp message from Harsh, “Fucker, Download your porn later and come down.”

Sagar saw Harsh after 4 years. Nothing had changed. He was back in Malad, permanently as his family had bought a flat of their own. That day in two hours, they lived the four missed years of their friendship by having an endless conversation over tea. That’s how they reconnected.

And that was how Sagar recovered from the absence that Priya had caused, but one thing was still left.

Chapter 4

Legends say, “Love enters back in your life when you least expect it.” Sagar was just like that. He wouldn't think much. If he liked someone, he fell in love with her; there was no middle road for him.

It was in January 2018, Sagar was attending the engagement of one of his colleagues, Rupali. Sagar used to call her didi as they worked in the same field.
It was on this occasion that Sagar saw Devaki for the first time.

Sagar arrived at the venue for the ring ceremony an hour before the starting time. By the time the main event had started, he had already gulped down 4 glasses of **Blue lagoon** welcome drink. His urinary system asked for relief. He went inside the gent's toilet. No one was there inside, so Sagar, in a jolly mood, opened his zip and did what needed to be done. He started singing a Hindi song named "Bum Diggy Diggy Bum Bum," which Malar had forced him to listen to.

His flow stopped, but before he could put his thing back and close the zip, a girl entered the toilet.
She saw Sagar and said, "Oh shit, sorry."

Sagar managed to say, "FUCK" loudly, and in an attempt to close the zip, his thing got stuck in the middle of nowhere. The girl was gone by now, but Sagar was in pain and was so embarrassed that he decided not to drink any fucking welcome drinks ever.

Later, when he entered the hall, the same girl was coming towards him. This time Sagar noticed her properly. Her dark eyes looked magnetic on her dusky skin. She was wearing a golden gown that looked beautiful on her. She was walking with the confidence to conquer the world, but silently she captured Sagar's heart.

She walked towards Sagar and said, "I am extremely sorry for what happened back there."
Without taking a breath, she continued, "Arre yaar, I was in a hurry, and that stupid girl's toilet was locked. So with no options left, I entered your toilet. Oh shit! I am sorry. I mean boys toilet, not your toilet. Shit, sorry!"

By now, Sagar was smiling, looking into the dark eyes of the girl. Sagar replied, "It's okay, chill."

The girl heaved a sigh of relief. "By the way, I am Devaki, Rupali didi's sister," she said, offering her hand to Sagar. "I am Sagar, Rupali didi's friend," he replied.

Sagar accepted Devaki's hand. The handshake lasted for five seconds, but in those five seconds, Sagar was evidently in love again. He found Devaki's beauty to be even indescribable by poems. It was beyond words and eyes.

The next eight months went into trying.

Devaki and Sagar started following each other on Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and started talking on Whatsapp. Devaki was talking with Sagar just like she used to speak with all her friends, no matter girl or boy. But Sagar was trying to impress her through social media in which he failed miserably.

Devaki went to Pune for her 2nd year of MBA and was busy doing something out of her life, but on the other hand, Sagar kept sending her one or the other photos or quotes on any of the social media platforms. She replied to some, but slowly the replies stopped not because she was ignoring Sagar, but because she was incredibly busy studying.

Sending messages didn't work, so Sagar started posting content on Instagram that Devaki used to post regularly, like poems, travel photos, or Rumi quotes. But here also he didn't get any other replies from Devaki apart from the usual "Hello" and "Good Morning".

Sagar was acting desperate. He thought that, like Priya, here also he would quickly get into a relationship with Devaki.

He shared the complete details with Malar and Harsh and asked them how to impress Devaki.

Though Harsh and Malar didn't know each other, yet they gave the same answer.

"Sagar, if she is interested in you, she will reciprocate. Don't try so hard."

But Sagar didn't pay any heed to his best friends' advice and carried on with his efforts.

If people created love through social media, it would have died a slow death. Good that Devaki didn't fall for Sagar; otherwise, it would have been an insult to love created when eyes and fingers met.

After trying from January 2018 till October 2018, nothing happened. Due to exams, Devaki's replies completely stopped. Sagar couldn't take it anymore and wrote a three-page love letter on a word document and sent it to her on the midnight of 14th November, through Whatsapp. The letter read:

Date: 14/11/2018
Place: Mumbai
For the last few days, I have been carrying a big secret with me, and it's getting more challenging for me to hold onto it. It hurts when you love someone a lot, but you have to act typical every day as if there's nothing

you want to confess. Just because you fear revealing your feelings. It is really very tough, and just to escape these fears, I am writing this letter to you, Devaki. So here, I am finally revealing myself to you.

How it all started: When I first sent you the PDF of "Harry Potter and the cursed child" on Facebook, we had just started following each other on Instagram. I saw your posts, your view on life and everything. I was attracted to you. I can't pinpoint why I was drawn to you. I think it was your smile. Maybe your eyes. I think it was the complete you. So I shared that book with you, and I was overwhelmed by your positive response. You even gave me your number. Afterward, we kept exchanging texts, but we did not talk much. You might think, how can I fall in love with you without knowing you, but that's the quest. You don't need to know someone to fall in love with. It just happens organically.

With time, my feelings for you grew, but I did not dare to express my feelings then, and I don't have it now. I recently went on a trip to Rishikesh and experienced something that made me realize the fragile nature of life. We shouldn't postpone things. Months passed, and I got busy with my work. I always felt happy seeing your Instagram handle, I still do. I was so delighted when I attended Rupali di's engagement in January. That day changed my life.

You might think about how meeting you that day for a few minutes can change my life, but I believe love has the power to do anything. That day I reached the venue early, and my mobile got switched off. I kept looking here and there, and then inside the toilet, we met for the first time. (A quite weird place to meet for the first time) Later we met again, and our eyes met. You smiled and started walking towards me. I kept sitting and did not even get up to wish you. Such a fool, I was! We started talking, and I realized that what I had for you was pure and real.

You left your bag on the chair next to me and went away. Later, someone tried to remove your bag and sit on the chair, but I picked up your bag and kept it under my chair. I told you about it later. I secretly felt so happy picking up your bag.

After that day, you have always had a permanent place inside my thoughts. That's the reason I keep sending you quotes on Instagram. When I listen to songs or ride my bike, your face always lingers in front of my eyes. I have found a purpose in life after meeting you. I was a caterpillar before I met you, but I have become a butterfly after that day.

Then I came to give you the Sita book that day. My heart skipped a beat on seeing you. You looked drop-dead gorgeous. I wanted to call you before you went to Boston, but I couldn't muster the courage. So I just sent you a voice note.
I am thankful that you took my help with the TED Talk at your college. I don't know if you remember or not, but you sent me Sandeep Maheshwari's video on love one day. I really felt good that day. I asked you about your experiences of love, but you did not say anything about that. Your eyes and smile reflect the depth with which you seek love. I really felt good the day you invited me to your place for Ganesh Chaturthi's celebrations and when you tagged me in an Instagram video. There is a lot to say, but I will keep it short:
I LOVE YOU.
*I felt the flashes of true love when I first met you. I started loving myself more after meeting you. I wanted to meet you on Diwali and tell you everything, but you were busy. I don't know what you think of me, but this love can create something significant in our lives if you give me a chance. I texted you on WhatsApp, but you did not reply back. I don't feel bad about it because love is not about being connected 24*7. After I met you, the power of life has occupied me completely.*
I keep thinking of all the times we talked. Devaki, it's up to you now. I will accept whatever you decide. But I would advise you to give one chance to love. Please don't discuss this love letter with anyone.
Here, I end this letter. I love you, and I will keep loving you. I know you are mature enough to understand the depth of the love that I am talking about here. I feel that your eyes and smile are the reflections of your soul. Your eyes are so deep that I want to get lost in them. Your smile lightens up my soul. Together we can surely give this world a great love story.
I hope to see you super soon. I wish to give you the "Kadha" from Bangla Sahib. Just remember that there will always be a person to love you.
Thank you for reading the letter. Will wait for your response."

The irony of humans! A love letter written in a word document is sent through Whatsapp.
Surprisingly Devaki replied to the love letter.
Yes, it was a big NO. Straight and simple.

This is the difference between obsession and love. In obsession, we try. Sagar was so obsessed with Devaki's beauty that he forgot that there is no

trying in love. It’s all about letting it go.

Chapter 5

Present Day
15 November 2018,
Terrace.
Sagar and Malar's conversation continues...
If all this hadn't happened, Sagar wouldn't have reconnected with Malar and Harsh, and this story would never be narrated. Heartbreaks are essential for they'll make great stories.
Sagar forgot that just yesterday, he got rejected by Devaki when he heard that Malar had ended her 6 years long relationship with Nimit. Sagar never thought this could happen.
"What the FUCK! Why?" said Sagar.
Malar got down from the water tank without saying anything, Sagar followed her. Many seconds passed. A cool breeze was passing by, but something was really not cool in Malar's life.
"Will you come with me to the Doctor tomorrow?" Malar asked Sagar.
"Of course, I will come. But what is happening, Malar?"
"Just come tomorrow, Sagar."
That day both Malar and Sagar didn't sleep. Something was about to happen.

NEXT DAY

Sagar took out his Bajaj Avenger bike, and Malar sat as a pillion rider. Both reached the clinic at Andheri in 30 minutes from Malad.
The first thing Sagar observed was the clinic's name, **"The Healing Place,"** which was different and new. Both of them entered the hospital. It was very cold inside, and they felt extremely calm because of the clinic's complete white interior. Everything was white, ranging from the sofa's to walls to doors; in fact, the reception desk's computer was white.
Malar reached the reception desk, and before she could say anything, the receptionist asked, "Yes, ma'am, how may I help you?"
"I have an appointment with Dr. Meera."
"Let me check. Oh, yes, here's your name. Are you here for the first time Ms. Malar?"
"Yes," Malar nodded. Sagar was confused. For some typical problems like stomach ache, cough, or cold, Malar wouldn't come to such a big clinic. He wanted Malar to tell him everything.
The girl gave Malar a form and asked her to fill it up with perfect details. She also took all the reports from Malar and punched them in a new file.
Malar and Sagar sat on the sofa. Finally breaking the silence, Sagar asked, "Why are we here?"
Malar first looked at the form and then at Sagar, "Because I suffer from Hypothyroidism."
Sagar was shocked. It took him a few seconds to digest the information he had just received.
Malar was duly filling the form. She knew her medical status would hit Sagar. It was also a shock for her when she came to know about it. Many trips were made to the doctors, but most of them just gave her the medication to stop the disease's immediate effect. No one tried to find the root cause. Dr. Meera's clinic was suggested to her by Nimit, her boyfriend, with whom she had broken up last month.
Sagar said, "Why didn't you tell me before? And how and when did this happen?"
Malar had completed filling the form. She took a deep breath, looked at Sagar, and said, "Did you have time for me in the last few months?"
Before Sagar could react, the girl in charge came and took away the form. She also told them that Dr. Meera was waiting for them. Both of them entered the Dr's cabin. Dr. Meera welcomed them with a warm smile and asked them to sit.

LAST NIGHT

Malar was alone in her house. It was 10 pm, and she was feeling lonely. She was alone outside post her break up with Nimit and alone inside because she had many things to say, but there was no one she could talk to.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Malar opened the door, and there she saw him standing with flowers. Nimit was back. As he entered the house, the first thing they did was the kiss. They kissed as if they would eat each other's lips. Nimit was holding Malar's waist tightly, and Malar was hugging him as if she would never let him go.

Malar looked into his eyes and said, "Baby, let's go to the bedroom."

Nimit lifted Malar in his arms, and once they were inside the bedroom, he threw Malar on the bed and got on top of her.

Their kissing session started again, but this time, they also removed each other's clothes. Nimit tore away Malar's red top and pulled her shorts in one go. Malar also helped Nimit to get out of his Jeans and T-shirt.

Both of them lay down in nothing but their undergarments.

Malar wanted him inside her. She removed Nimit's underwear and looked into his eyes, and said, "Let's do it."

Nimit followed the same, and both of them were naked. Malar was wet. They were doing it after a long time. Nimit held his penis and was about to enter Malar. Malar closed her eyes in pleasure.

Few seconds passed, but Nimit didn't do anything. As Malar opened her eyes to check, Nimit slapped her hard on her right cheek.

Malar was shocked. She didn't know what was happening. Nimit held her neck tightly as if he was going to choke her.

He spat on her face and said, "You fucking fat pig! Do you really think that I will make love to a shitty fat pig like you? First, look at yourself in the mirror and then come to me."

Malar got up from her bed in a jerk. She looked around, and there was complete darkness. No one was around. She turned on the light. Her heart was racing. She was completely drenched in sweat.

She started crying out loudly. For the tenth time in the last month, she dreamt of the same nightmare. It was 2 am in the night when this happened, and after that, Malar couldn't sleep again.

Chapter 6

Inside Dr. Meera's clinic
Dr. Meera offered Malar and Sagar a bottle of water. She asked them to relax and calm down.
A doctor needs to calm down their patients first. But not all doctors possess this quality; for them, it is just a business, not a profession. But Dr. Meera's eyes had humility. She was utterly opposed to the stereotypical image of a doctor. Going by her dressing sense and her glowing face, she didn't look a day older than 25. But originally, she was 35 and married.

That day she wore a green Kurti and blue jeans, which perfectly graced her. She was also wearing a small bindi, which looked very beautiful on her. Sagar took a few sips of water, but Malar didn't open the water bottle. She was tense. Dr. Meera noticed it.
"So Malar, How are you feeling today?" Meera asked optimistically.
"I am not feeling that great," Malar told the truth.

Meera went through Malar's file. After two minutes of studying, she closed the file and took a deep breath.
"Malar, your reports are not that great, to be honest. There are two types of thyroid abnormalities, one is hypo, and another one is hyper. What you have is hypo functioning thyroid."
Malar knew this, and she tried to keep a straight face, but now Sagar was upset. It was visible on his face.
Dr. Meera continued, "But according to my 10 years of experience practicing as a doctor, I believe our bodies are constantly changing. If we understand the root cause of the disease, we can heal it. So Malar, could you share a bit about your life and when the symptoms of thyroid started to show?"

Malar nodded, looking at Sagar and then at Dr. Meera. Sagar thought that his sitting there would make Malar uncomfortable, so he got up, but Malar held his hand and signaled him through her eyes to sit down.

Malar is not someone who lived in the past. She lived in the present. If she had a terrible fight with anyone yesterday, she would forget about it the next day and make a fresh start with that person.
The last year changed her a lot as a person. Her past was an extremely significant part of her life.

It's said that the storyteller should never love any character in his book. He should be equal to all, but I will be biased here; I just love Malar.

We are born pure and white from the inside, but the white inside us starts to blacken as we grow up. But Malar remained white and pristine even after growing up because her parents brought her up with lots of love and no expectations.

Situations and death tried to take Malar's purity from her. When she was five, her father passed away because of a cardiac arrest.

That day would have pushed Malar into darkness forever, but her mother emerged as her hero.

Growing up, Malar just wanted to be like her mother, a great lover, dreamer, and a financially independent woman. Malar's teenage years were all about becoming like her mom.

In her 10th class, she topped her school by scoring 96%. Her journey began that day. She chose Commerce, and it was evident in her head that she wanted to be a Chartered Accountant and become financially independent like her mother.

But her life was not just about studies, she was very famous in college because of her looks and beauty.

At 5'10 feet tall, Malar would have given any model a run for her money. With a wheatish complexion, she had crystal clear glowing skin.

Her body had a perfect shape. At 60kgs, she had dark black hair, which flowed with the confidence of conquering the world. The best parts were her eyes, dark brown eyes on which poets could write an infinite number of poetries.

At that, Malar pulled off the shortest of denim shorts paired with a white t-shirt, which quoted, "I am here to Rule."

Despite slaying in western clothes, Malar's heart ruled in Uttar Pradesh Kurtis with the minute and delicate works and leggings with traditional earrings.

When she used to wear her favorite black Kurti, she used to look at herself in the mirror and give herself a flying kiss. She was her own soul.

Malar cleared the first two levels of Chartered Accountancy Very easily. She got an articleship in one of the biggest companies, and during that time, she met Nimit.

Nimit was four years older than Malar and an engineer by profession. He was working in the same company where Malar was doing her articleship.

In Mumbai, during summer, everyone who stays in the city wants it to rain so that Mumbai can be soothing and a little more beautiful. And when it starts to rain, people want it to pour down as if there is no tomorrow.

That day it happened. It rained as if there was no tomorrow, and both Malar and Nimit with the other staff got stuck at the office, and the lights and mobile networks were suspended for the night.

It was around 12 am when most of the staff were sleeping; Nimit wanted to drink coffee. He went to the office pantry, turned on the unused gas stove, and made himself a cup of black coffee.

Precisely during that time, Malar also happened to enter the pantry for water. Nimit turned his mobile flashlight towards her face. Malar was caught off guard.

She smiled awkwardly and managed to say, "Oh, sorry... Hi… Can you pass me the water bottle?"

Nimit was overwhelmed by Malar's smile. "Don't be sorry, here's the water."

While Malar sipped the water, Nimit still focused the flashlight on her face and said, "I am here trying to make coffee without milk."

Malar laughed while drinking water.

Nimit made black coffee for two. "Want some? It will surely help in passing the night."

Malar pondered for a moment, looked at the coffee, heard the sound of the rain outside, and accepted the cup.

They both sat down in the pantry itself. Nimit switched off the flashlight. They were not able to see each other's faces, but that night they talked. They bonded over each other's life stories and experiences. Nimit's heart and mind were still not over with Malar's awkward smile, and Malar was not over with Nimit's black coffee. It was for the first time in her life that day she had tasted coffee. She told Nimit about it. He just smiled.

Dawn set in the next morning. Nimit saw Malar's smile again, and this time he was sure. Nimit made black coffee again, and Malar tasted it. She even noticed Nimit staring at her while she drank the coffee produced by him. She was sure.

The rainy clouds went away, bringing Malar and Nimit close and making them fall in love. Malar was waiting for her mother to return from the office.

When her mom arrived, Malar brought her water and sat down next to her. She held her hand and said, "Mummy, you don't need to work anymore. I became a chartered accountant."

Both daughter and mother hugged each other, and in such happy times, the mother missed her husband, and the daughter missed her father.

"I miss Papa today," Malar said while looking at her father's photo frame.

Her mother let the silence heal their hearts. A few moments later, her mother broke the silence.

"Beta, your father always wanted me to work even after you were born, not for money but for independence. He didn't want me to waste my qualification sitting at home. But I was sluggish. I was so stuck in the comfort zone that I never tried. The day when your father left us, this god, nature, or the universe took away the most precious part of my life. But in hindsight, it also gave me a purpose to do something, and I am sure that my husband must be so proud of you today. Malar, every day I see him in you. You have his height and his brain."

This time Malar let the silence take over. She went into the bedroom and brought a huge bag containing all the photo albums.

Till late night both the mother and the daughter laughed, cried, and hugged each other several times. When the album viewing session was over, Malar said, "Mummy, there is one more thing I need to tell you."

"Yep, tell me."

"Mummy, I love someone, and I have been dating him for the last six months. I am sorry that I didn't tell you before".

Malar's mom laughed and asked Malar to invite Nimit to their home the very next day. The next day Malar's mom met Nimit, and she loved him. She was more than happy in her life now. Her daughter had found someone very special. All three of them clicked pictures and had lunch.

Everything was good, and everyone was happy. Malar finally achieved what she wanted.

Chapter 7

This story would have ended in the previous chapter itself when Malar's life seemed perfect. She had a great job, a loyal and loving boyfriend, an ideal body, and everything that one wants. But the nature of this nature is to change. Water that flows remains fresh, but mosquitoes breed in stagnant water.

In 2016, Malar became a chartered accountant. That was a great year for her. On Nimit's birthday, they both made love for the first time, in Malar's house. Every weekend they would search on Zomato and go to the best and coolest of restaurants in town. By the end of 2016, Malar had gained 2 extra kilos. But it was fine, she was happy. The cherry on the cake was that she was promoted in January 2017. She was earning more than Nimit.

However, her workload increased, her office timings changed from 10 am to 7 pm. But there was no fixed timing for her to leave the office. She would often reach home at 11 pm or sometimes at 1 pm.

She had to, at times, skip her breakfast and dinner. Such was her routine. Due to excessive workload pressure, Malar used to eat her nails a lot. Two months into the promotion, Malar used to wait for weekends to go out with Nimit to expensive places to eat and drink.

By mid-2017, Malar and Nimit had had a few fights because Nimit started to think that Malar was not giving enough time to their relationship. By the weekend, Malar used to get so tired that she used her holidays to sleep and rejuvenate. Despite that, her eyes were surrounded by dark circles.

Her salary was a whopping 1.25 lakhs per month. But most of it was not used because Malar didn't have the time to use the money she earned. Such is the irony of life.

Whenever Malar questioned herself whether she was unnecessarily stressing out, she would immediately comfort herself by saying that it was the work she had studied so hard for. She would keep working with full dedication. She wanted to marry Nimit by 2018.

She thought she had planned her life entirely. Work hard for the next two years and then marry the love of her life.

November 2017,

Nimit went to Delhi for six months as the project head of the company. It was planned that Malar and Nimit would go to Delhi during the weekend and explore it together. Malar planned to come back on Monday. But one hour before the scheduled time, Malar backed out because an urgent meeting was fixed at a client's place.
That day, Nimit shouted at Malar for the first time. He switched off his phone, and they didn't talk for one week straight.
On the other hand, Malar didn't think much about her backing out at the last minute. She felt her client's satisfaction was more important. She called Nimit one week later and said, "Sorry." They patched up, but things were looking very gloomy by the end of 2017.
When 2018 started, Malar had a tough time for the first 15 days of the year. She had a lot of work piled up; on top of that, she suffered from constant constipation. Every morning she tried cleaning her intestine, but the efforts were useless. On 20 January, she was working from home, she still suffered from constipation. No metabolites worked. She was irritated and closed her laptop. She went to the terrace to get some fresh air and divert her mind.
There almost after six months, she saw Sagar, her childhood friend. His back was turned towards her. She took quiet steps towards him and wrapped her palms around his eyes.
"Don't guess who I am," Malar said precisely the way she used to shout during their childhood days.
Sagar knew only Malar said, "Don't guess who I am."
There was no reason why she said that. It was their childhood ritual. So they didn't try to find meaning in it.
Sagar sarcastically said, "How come the busiest person on this planet finally found the time to come to this poor place called terrace?"
Malar took away her hands from Sagar's eyes and made a face looking at Sagar, who was grinning.
"Aisa kuch nahi hai."
Sagar gives it back, "That means today Nimit might be busy. That's why you are here..?"
Malar again made a lousy face at Sagar.
"If you want to continue saying such shit, then it's better that I go back. We are meeting after six months, and you have to fire me with all your taunts."
Malar turned around and began to go back. "Aye Nautanki," Sagar said and got hold of Malar's hand.

Malar smiled. She knew Sagar would stop her from going back any day.
They sat on the water tank from where they could see the sunset.
Sagar began the conversation, "So…."
"So…." Malar replied
They then spoke like friends about all the things that were not important in their lives, like movies, cakes, cafes, songs, and chai.
They both knew everything about each other. Yet, they talked for hours that day.
Before, they were connected on Whatsapp and Instagram regularly, but when they talked that day till 10 pm, they realized how much they missed each other's company.
So it was decided that both of them would try to meet on the terrace during weekends.
It's so strange that no matter how much we grow in life, we are still the same when talking with our friends. Because deep down, we know that we don't have to be what we are not with them. Sagar and Malar were just themselves when they were together.

Chapter 8

By March 2018, Malar weighed 70kgs, and no matter how much she slept or ate, she would always feel lethargic and weak.

At times her hands would shake while working, and at times her eyelids would flicker constantly. She ignored it by thinking that it was due to a lack of vitamins.
Malar's body was trying to tell her many things, but she kept ignoring the signs because she was busy.
During weekends she would video chat with Nimit and would later go and sit on the terrace with Sagar.
She also got irritated when Sagar continuously spoke of a girl he liked. Her name was Devaki. She tried listening to him, but her mind was agitated. By June 2018, matters got really out of hand.
Malar's weight touched 80kgs. Her hair began to dry up, and every morning she fought thousands of battles with her weakness to reach office.
For the first time in years, Malar fought with her mom when she suggested she join exercise classes to reduce her weight. After that, Malar's mom didn't say anything to Malar. She thought Malar was stressed because of work.
While working, Malar felt extremely happy for a few hours, and then suddenly, she would feel angry. She blasted her junior for the smallest of mistakes, and once, she even threw away her mobile phone in anger. She didn't know what was happening in her body and brain. On one of her lowest days, her office was conducting a health management camp for all the employees.
Malar also gave all the body tests in that health camp with the hope of finding a solution.
The next day the head doctor of the health camp called Malar personally. She checked Malar's throat, asked her a few questions, and then directly looking into Malar's eyes told her that she was suffering from hypothyroidism.

Chapter 9

PRESENT DAY
INSIDE DR. MEERA's CLINIC
Malar finally sipped some water. It took her a few minutes to narrate all the events that had happened in recent times.
Sagar was feeling bad. He reprimanded himself for not being there for his best friend when she needed him the most. He felt pathetic. He was so busy pursuing Devaki that he gave up on Malar. He didn't say anything. He wanted to say sorry.
It was time for Dr. Meera to speak now. She looked at Sagar and said
"So Nimit, how did you react when Malar told you about her problems?"
"No, no, I am not Nimit. I am Sagar. I am a friend who was not with her when she needed him the most," Sagar said what he felt.
Malar looked at Sagar. She saw his wet eyes. "I broke up with Nimit last month."
Dr. Meera asked, "Why..?"
Malar spoke up, "Because of my anger and mood swings."
In that extremely upsetting moment, Malar had to again go back to her past to narrate the event that led to her breakup with Nimit.
Malar hadn't wholly broken after she was diagnosed with hypothyroidism. She was a fighter, and she fought hard. Her mother also helped and supported her. She purposely didn't tell Nimit about it because she knew he would leave his Delhi project and return to her.
During video chats, she adjusted her mobile so that Nimit could only see her face. In fact, Nimit asked her several times, "Why is your face looking so swollen?" But Malar would lie, saying, "I just woke up na, that's why."
The medicines prescribed to her were working slowly, but her mood swings and constipation increased day by day. Her energy levels were also at an all-time low, but she managed somehow.
Her doctor advised her to take a break from work. The rest would bring her thyroid levels under control, but Malar ignored that advice and kept working.

During weekends she would go and meet Sagar. She expected Sagar to ask her if everything was alright with her. But he didn't, and neither did Malar tell him about anything.
They would talk about random things and also about how Sagar could impress Devika.
Nimit came back from Delhi in June. First thing up, he called Malar and asked her to meet him up.
Malar agreed to meet Nimit in the evening, but she was nervous. When Nimit went to Mumbai, Malar weighed 65 kgs, and at that time, she weighed 82 kgs. By now, Malar had lost much of her confidence. She left the office in the afternoon itself and went home. She was all alone inside her house.

She didn't want to face her boyfriend in such a condition. She went inside the bathroom, removed her clothes, and looked at herself in the mirror. There were stretch marks on the upper part of her breasts, around her hips, and near her thighs.
There were dark patches near her armpits. It was because of the hormonal disbalance in her body.
The size of her breast and hips had increased more than the average level. The Doctor told her it was because her body could not burn fats as her thyroid gland was not functioning normally.
Malar didn't even realize that she ended up with tears in her eyes when she was looking at herself. In the evening, Nimit cried when Malar told her everything. He hugged her tight and whispered in her ears, "Everything will be fine. I am with you". That day it rained in Mumbai like never before.
One month before November, everything was improving steadily. Malar had fewer and fewer mood swings. Her weight was the same, but she felt good at times, and at times, she had her bad days. That day was an excellent day, which turned out to be wrong.
After a very long time, Malar was meeting Nimit at his house. Both of them were looking for some time with each other. When you love someone for a very long time, such personal time helps to re-evaluate what you have for each other. Before this, most of their weekends were spent discussing doctors. Nimit really tried hard to help Malar. He prepared a list of doctors Malar could go to. Dr. Meera was one of them.
When Malar was on her way to Nimit's house, it dawned on her that they both had not made love in the last one year.

She missed being caressed by her boyfriend. She stopped the auto and went to a medical store to buy some condoms. She was so happy and wanted to make love that day.
"After a long time, I am feeling good about myself." Malar thought to herself.
When she reached Nimit's house, she hugged him tightly. Nimit was also taken aback, but he also gave in soon without thinking much.
They both went to his bedroom and sat on the bed. Malar held his hand tightly, and it was a sign for him. They both looked into each other's eyes and kissed.
They removed each other's clothes and continued kissing each other. Malar thought about the condoms.
"One minute," she said and pulled out the box of condoms from her bag.
During that moment, Nimit, for the first time, saw the changes in Malar's body. He was mentally comparing her past body type and present body type. He experienced something changing in his brain. Malar gave him the condoms and removed his underwear. Nimit was not completely hard by now.
He continued kissing and holding Malar, but she wanted to take their lovemaking to the actual level.
She whispered in his ears, "Get on top of me," and she lay down on her back. Nimit got on top of her, but he was not turned on.
He tried stroking himself, but nothing helped. He didn't know why this was happening because just two days back, he had watched porn and masturbated perfectly.
Malar realized something was wrong. "What happened, Nimit?" she asked.
Nimit didn't say anything and got his mouth between her legs. The act continued for two minutes. But by now, Malar had understood what was wrong. She got up with a jerk leaving Nimit shocked.
"Nimit, why are you not getting hard?"
"Malar, it's just that we are doing it after a long time, so that's why it's taking the time."
By now, Malar had started wearing her undergarments.
"Nimit, don't beat around the bush, this is the only thing which doesn't take the time I know, and the reason is my fat body." Her voice was loud. At that moment, without their knowledge, Nimit's father entered the house with the spare key.

Malar got up and wore her clothes. Nimit knew this was getting out of hand.
"Malar, don't say rubbish. It's not because of your fat body; it's just that my mind is processing to accept the changes in your body." Nimit too used a loud voice, and those words sparked a sudden mood swing in Malar. She started crying.
"Oh, now the truth is coming out. So it was all about my body. Nimit, I have not made myself fat. It's the fucking thyroid!" She growled while crying.
She put things back in her bag and stormed out of Nimit's room. She found Nimit's father in the living room watching T.V.
He saw Malar and smiled. "How are you, Beta? I heard you and Nimit talking, so didn't feel like disturbing you both."
Malar didn't know what to say to him. She just gave a fake smile.
Nimit's father continued, "Beta, you should do something to reduce your weight. Your weight has really increased since the last time we met."
Malar's anger took over her "Uncle, I earn a lot of money, and I don't eat food using your or your son's money. So you have no fucking right to tell me to lose weight. And if you don't understand English, let me translate what I just said in Hindi. Main aapke baap ke paise ka nahi khati."
Nimit heard everything and shouted, "Shut up, Malar. This is not the way to talk to my father. He doesn't know about your condition. Apologize to him now." By now, Nimit's father was dumbstruck.
Malar said, "You fucking don't shout at me, and if your father doesn't know anything, then he should not comment on my weight."
Nimit couldn't take it anymore. "Get lost from my house and never show me your face ever."
That day Malar hated her body even more, and that night she had her first nightmare.

What would you choose between love and self-respect? Both go hand in hand.
Love can't survive without self-respect, and Malar chose the latter. She respected herself a lot. Nimit called her after that incident to sort out the matter, but Malar was adamant that she would not say sorry to his father. Both decided that it was better to part ways. Nimit left the company and shifted to Delhi as he had a big offer.
Malar messaged him the day he was leaving, "All the best."

Nimit replied, "Same to you."
That day both of them cried. But in hindsight, it was better.

Chapter 10

INSIDE DR MEERA'S CLINIC

Dr. Meera listened quietly to everything that Malar had to say. Now, it was time for her show. It was time for the solution because she had understood what the problem was.

She got up from her chair and stood behind Malar's chair. She turned Malar's chair. Malar was facing her. Sagar too turned around to face the Doctor.

"So Malar, how much money do you have in your bank account as your savings?" Dr. Meera asked in a commanding tone.

Malar definitely did not expect such a type of question from the Doctor. She remained silent. Dr. Meera smiled. "Arre don't worry, I will not send Income Tax officers to your place, and even if I do, being a C.A, you know how to manipulate them."

Malar had no option but to answer, "Ma'am, actually, I don't know the correct figure, but I have around 20 lakhs as my savings," Malar replied

"Wow!" Dr. Meera clapped and appreciated Malar. "That's a great achievement Malar. I was struggling financially when I was your age," she said.

Malar wondered why the discussion of her savings was brought into the picture. She smiled forcefully.

Dr. Meera continued, "But it doesn't matter if you have 20 lakhs, 2 crores or 20 crores. Because no amount of money will help you clear your stomach from constipation."

Sagar instantly realized the sarcasm and couldn't control his laughter. Dr. Meera joined him in laughing at her own joke.

Malar looked at them, and after a few seconds, realizing the irony of her life and stomach, laughed like never before.

For the next two minutes, they just looked at each other and laughed wholeheartedly.

Dr. Meera was back on her chair. She asked, "Do you feel better now?"

Malar replied with a bright smile, "Yes, of course. I feel good."

"See, that's the power of laughing at our own problems." Dr. Meera quoted, and she was very right.
"So our first step towards recovery and healing will be to cure your constipation. For this week, I will prescribe you a few tablets, but from today and every day, you have to compulsorily eat 2-3 bananas as soon as you wake up. It will naturally clear your problem of constipation, and bananas cost just 20 rupees, not 20 lakhs." Dr. Meera winked.
Malar Nodded.
Sagar, on the other hand, realized the need to start eating bananas because he needed to put on weight as he was really skinny.
Dr. Meera continued, "And secondly, I can't comment on your personal life, but I will suggest you just let it go. Your only purpose, for now, should be to heal yourself, and for that, you need to help yourself. Another suggestion would be to join a gym because we need you to lose your fat, not your muscles. GYM will definitely help you."
Malar just nodded.
Sagar patted Malar and said, "I will also come with you as I need to put on some weight." Malar smiled.
Dr. Meera wrote down some medicines and gave the prescription to Malar.
"So Malar, have these medicines as prescribed and just two things extra: bananas and gym. Come and meet me after 30 days, and by then, I want your constipation to go away."
Malar took the paper from Dr. Meera and shook hands with her. She said, "Thank you so much, Ma'am."
Dr. Meera gave an assuring smile. Both Malar and Sagar got up to leave. Malar was the first to leave the cabin, and as Sagar was going out, Dr. Meera called him "Sagar one minute."
Sagar turned around, and Dr. Meera said, "Sagar listen to me carefully. There will come a time when you will have to tell Malar something very important."

Chapter 11

That morning Harsh woke up in a happy mood. It was one of those days for him when he woke up happy for no reason.
He opened his phone and checked his WhatsApp. Most of the messages were from girls from his community and a message from Sagar, which revealed that Devaki had rejected him. He knew this would happen.
He replied, "Bro, don't worry. I am with you. Girls come and go. Don't think much about it. I will meet you in the evening. Tc."
Next, he had his Breakfast along with his protein shake and went to take a bath. Inside the bathroom, he looked at himself in the mirror. He was so proud of all the hard work he had put into the gym. Broad shoulder. Muscular and well built back along with a well-built chest and ripped arms. The cherry on the cake was his 6 pack.
In the gym, he was a wet dream of many girls and some boys. He came out of the shower and wore a fresh white shirt and blue denim. He also put on the wristwatch that his dad had gifted him two years ago when Harsh started his own plywood business.
When we are in school, we all are immature kids in some or the other way. Our school keeps us away from religion and politics. Because in school we all pray together every day,
"All Indians are my brothers and sisters."
There is no impact of religion on us till we pass out of school. The impact might be there in our houses. But once you are in school, everyone becomes one and equal.
Harsh was also that child in school. When at home, he performed all the poojas that his parents told him to do, but nothing mattered once inside the school. During Ramzan, he would visit his cricket buddy's house to eat sewaya and during Christmas, to eat plum cake.
He was happy because, in his mind, he was the Bollywood hero who would fall in love and spend all his life with his wife.
Once school ended, things started to change in Harsh's life. The programming began. Once, when Harsh Attended a Marriage, his relatives

there told him, "In the next five to six years, you will also get hitched. So start earning money soon and buy your own house".
He also heard, "If you do something big in the next five to six years, there will be a huge demand for you amongst girls."
His mind was filled with the thoughts that girls were things you can buy if you have money. At times his parents also supported this.
A significant shift in Harsh's Bollywood romance belief came when he was 17 years old. Harsh's cousin ran away and got married to a girl who was not from their caste or community.
This news spread like wildfire. The cousin's family was thrown out of their community because their son broke a significant rule. They were forced to apologize to everyone in the community. They were outcast from all the relatives' gatherings, and they were never allowed to attend any marriages.
When Harsh saw this, he asked his father,
"Pappa, his parents, didn't do anything wrong, why do they have to suffer?"
Harsh's father was a diplomatic man. He couldn't ignore Harsh anymore.
"Beta see, we are made by our samaj (community), and no one can go against it. Otherwise, the whole family has to pay the price.."
He continued, "and what happened was good. This will be a lesson for all the youngsters of our samaj that going against our religion will cost them respect."
Harsh wondered, "What if I fall in love with someone from the other caste or religion. What if my parents are also thrown out?" He feared.
The most dangerous thing in the world is when you are forced to believe fear in the name of love. Harsh dared to ask his father, "But papa, what about love?"
By now, Harsh's mother had also become a part of this conversation. She looked into her husband's eyes.
"Harsh, our respect in our samaj is more important than anything else in this world. And respect comes when we have money and a big house. Only then will you get good matches. Harsh, remember that love is secondary; money should be the first priority."
What Harsh's father said totally conflicted with what Harsh thought and perceived about love. He thought love was the ultimate thing in life.
He stayed silent, accepting what his father had just said. Harsh's mom now came to the scene and said, "Harsh, promise me that you will never marry any girl outside of our samaj."

Samaj or any religion bounds people to their parents. The same thing was happening with Harsh. He was about to get tied up. "Yes, mummy, don't worry."
Harsh's father interrupted. "Say the full sentence, Harsh. Say that you promise you will not marry any girl from outside our caste."
This was forceful. Harsh felt that, but he didn't have the guts to ask what if there is no love with the girl he got married to within their samaj.
He said, "Yes, papa, I promise I will not get married to a girl outside the samaj."
Five years had passed since that promise. Harsh and his parents didn't realize that love can't be forced, and no force can stop love.

Chapter 12

Harsh is 22 now. He had finished his studies and started his plywood business. Only one thing remained in Harsh's life now - Love.
Harsh wanted to desperately fall in love. Not from outside the samaj as that would go against his parents' will, and he also remembered what his father had said, "Respect is only earned through money."
Harsh knew that earning money would take many years. He thought a lot about what one can do to earn respect and to woo girls.
1) Good Physique
Being a dedicated cricket player, Harsh wanted to make a ripped body. So he joined a gym one and a half years ago, and now he has the six-pack and the muscles that most guys just dream about.
2) Get famous with the help of your talent.
Harsh's talent was cricket. So, every time there was a cricket tournament organized in his samaj, he emerged as the best batsman of the season. Many girls from his samaj became his fan and cheered for him when he hit sixes.
3) Killer Instagram account
After getting famous through cricket, mostly every girl from his samaj started following him on Instagram. He knew that to impress them further, his Instagram handle should look cool. He regularly posted videos of him during exercises - flexing his muscles and shirtless pictures of his six pack. Every day he also shared romantic shayaris on his Instagram stories.
Harsh wanted to prove to no one in particular that he could also become famous without money and fall in love with his talents. He got what he wanted eight months ago; out of the blue, a girl from Harsh's Samaj messaged him on Instagram. Her name was Aayushi. They started talking, and it's hard to believe, but they both indeed said, "I love you" to each other in just two days of talking on Instagram.
When you search for something that can't be found, you unintentionally search for something else.
You might be confused after reading the above statement, but that's what happens when we confuse love for something else. The same thing happened with Harsh and Aayushi.

For Harsh, it was not loving, but it was comfort. Aayushi was beautiful and cute. She was rich and reciprocated the same likes which Harsh had. The best part was that she was from the same samaj. Harsh thought that he could fall in love with her quickly.
For Aayushi, it was not loving. It was the same as Harsh. She knew that her father would not allow her to marry anyone outside their samaj. And since childhood, it was planted in her brain that marriage is the most important thing for a girl in their samaj. One also saw it as a rule that all girls should marry by 22. Aayushi was 21, and she found Harsh to be cute and handsome. She was attracted by his physique. She thought that they both could get married.
But they both were still naive enough to think that they knew their parents completely.

Chapter 13

Two Days Ago,
It had been almost six months since Harsh and Aayushi started dating. Officially in their heads and unofficially outside. They were confident that being from the same samaj, their parents would agree to their alliance, and eventually, they would get married.
Two days ago, Aayushi called Harsh in the afternoon. "Hey KitKat, are you free?" she said.
Aayushi had nicknamed Harsh KitKat because he liked that chocolate very much. Every time Harsh and Aayushi had met in the last six months, she had given him a KitKat.
"Yes, Piri Piri," Harsh replied.
Aayushi loved Piri Piri fries from Mcd a lot. So he had named her Piri Piri.
"Okay, listen carefully. Today during lunch, daddy showed me the photos of a few boys. He said that it's time for me to get married as good offers are coming for me," Aayushi explained.
Harsh thought that her father was calling boys "offers" as though she was a product. But he kept quiet. "KitKat, say something?" Aayushi wanted Harsh's take on it.
"So what should we do now?" he asked.
"Arre Pagal, tell your daddy and ask for my hand. I am sure he will agree." Aayushi said with confidence, which only comes when you have a lot of innocence inside you.
"Hmmm. Okay. I will speak with him tonight, Piri Piri. But…" Harsh left his words incomplete.
"But what, KitKat? tell me."
"Apna ho jayega na? I just want us to end up together" Harsh felt what he said.
He just wanted to end up getting married out of love, not out of an arrangement made by his parents.
"Arre baby, why are you taking so much tension! Everything will fall into place; just talk to your daddy with confidence." Aayushi wanted to get

married to someone she knew at least and not with someone her parents had selected out of the blue.
That night, Harsh talked with his father and mother at the dinner table about Aayushi. He told them that she belonged to the same samaj, and he loved her. Harsh's mom and dad remained neutral after knowing about Aayushi. Harsh's father said, "Okay, I will speak with her father and then decide."
The next day Harsh's father told him that he had talked with Aayushi's father, and the next day Aayushi and her family would come to meet their family.
Harsh's happiness knew no bounds. He called Aayushi, but her cell was switched off. He messaged her on Whatsapp, but she did not read them. Harsh ignored it and was waiting for the next day.
The next day Harsh woke up with freshness and happiness. He took a bath, wore a crisp white shirt and blue jeans. He had his Breakfast and waited for Aayushi.
He tried her number, but it was switched off, and on Whatsapp, she had not read his texts.
He asked his dad to call Aayushi's dad to know what time they could be expecting them. Harsh's father said, "Yes, I will call him."
He took out his phone and called her father. The call lasted for 30 seconds. Harsh's father said, "They will reach by 12pm."
Harsh couldn't control his excitement. Exactly at 12:01pm, the doorbell rang. Harsh was inside his bedroom. He got up with a jerk when he heard the doorbell. He knew that she was finally there. But he waited inside the room.
His mother opened the door, and all the guests came inside. Harsh's mom and dad welcomed them with warm greetings. Soon they all settled down in the hall. Harsh was still inside the room, but now he realized that it was time to go out to meet and see his love. For the one last time, he looked at himself in the mirror, moved his fingers through his hair, adjusted his shirt, and came out of his room to meet Aayushi, but instead, he got the biggest shock of his life.
The girl sitting in the hall was not Aayushi but someone else.

Chapter 14

Harsh saw the girl and her parents talking with his parents. Everyone saw Harsh and smiled. Harsh's mind stopped working, he couldn't believe what was happening. He ran back to his bedroom.

Harsh's father excused himself and followed his son inside the room, and locked the door.

"Where is Aayushi, and who are they?" Harsh shouted. He looked as if he would cry anytime soon. He felt weak inside his heart.

"Beta don't shout. I will explain everything to you. Sit down." Harsh's father remained calm.

"Just tell me where Aayushi is. I don't want to know anything else." Harsh remained standing, and shouted.

"Why are you asking me? Ask Aayushi herself." This time his father raised his tone a little.

"Her phone is switched off," Harsh said, panicking.

Harsh's father took out his phone. He opened his samaj's Whatsapp group, where all influential and wealthy people of the samaj were members. He tapped on a picture sent by a fellow member.

He showed the picture to Harsh, saying, "See this, your Aayushi already got engaged to someone else this morning."

Harsh couldn't believe his eyes. Aayushi and the Boy with whom she got engaged were holding hands, smiling, and showing their engagement rings together in the camera.

"This is not possible. I want to talk to Aayushi now. I am going to her house," Harsh couldn't control himself and his tears.

Harsh's father made him sit on the bed. He kept his hand on Harsh's shoulder, gave him a glass of water, and said, "Beta in our samaj, everything is possible if the boy has money. You might think I have tricked you today by lying to you about Aayushi coming to meet you, but she and her father would have tricked you for a lifetime."

"As promised, I called her father yesterday and told him that our kids love each other. So we should talk about marriage. Do you know what he said,"

Harsh looked at his father and remained silent.

"He replied that he only wanted to give his daughter to a family that was far richer than him. He said Aayushi had already got engaged to a boy from Ahmedabad, and very soon, they would get married. Then he just disconnected the call."
"Then why did Aayushi lie to me about us getting married..?" Harsh was crying now
"Harsh for rich people like Aayushi, we are just toys. She played with you and got engaged to the richer Boy. The photo is proof. If she really loved you, she would not be smiling in the picture."

Harsh realized that his father was right. Few things were still not clear in his mind, but the photo answered all his questions. Harsh's doubt became more evident when he realized that Aayushi had switched off her phone the day before yesterday and blocked him on Whatsapp. He couldn't believe he was cheated in love.

Bollywood movies only taught him to love, but never in his dreams, he thought that someone would cheat on his love and emotions.
Both father and son stayed quiet. Harsh asked again, "But papa, why did you lie to me yesterday, and who is this family sitting outside."
"Harsh, if I would have said the truth yesterday, you would not be sitting here, and as a father, I don't want my son to hurt himself because of a girl who doesn't value him. When God closes one door, he opens another one that is bigger than we ever imagined. Last night, God blessed us with another door. The family outside is from Surat, and they are the richest in our samaj. They want their daughter Khushboo to marry you. Just imagine their humility. Even though they have a lot of money, they want to give their daughter to us."
"Papa, I don't want to marry anybody." Harsh was still crying.
"Harsh, why are you ruining your life for a girl who left you for money? She was selfish. It's time you take charge of your life and marry Khushboo. Let's show the samaj that we can also join our names with the richest families."

Harsh didn't say anything. He knew his father was right. He was angry and just wanted to do something. So he agreed with his father, and both went outside to fix his alliance with Khushboo.

Khushboo's parents were happy looking at Harsh. They saw him as someone who would listen to them and work in their Diamond business after marriage.

Both the set of parents gave their kids some time to talk. Both Khushboo and Harsh came to his bedroom. For the first time, they both looked at each other appropriately. Harsh just kept quiet. His brain didn't process how Khushboo looked or what she was wearing. He was still thinking about Aayushi. His thoughts were interrupted when Khushboo asked him that if he was being forced into the marriage.
Harsh curtly said, "No."
He then asked, "What about you?"
Khushboo just laughed and said, "It doesn't matter what the girl wants in our samaj. For that matter, in our samaj, it doesn't even matter what the boys want. What matters is what our parents want. So yes, it doesn't matter."

After two minutes, they both came out and said yes to marriage. There and then, Khushboo and Harsh exchanged rings, and their photos were clicked. This time Harsh gave his best shot. He gave his best smile in all the pictures. Their photo was shared in the samaj's Whatsapp groups. It was the next big thing for their samaj as the wealthiest family's girl got engaged to someone not as rich as them.

Khushboo's family requested them to not share the engagement details with anyone outside their samaj as their Maharaj had said to directly announce the news of their alliance one month before their marriage.

Harsh's family was so awestruck by their richness that they agreed to everything. It didn't matter to Harsh and Khushboo. They just faked their smiles.

Two days later, Aayushi got married to the rich boy from Ahmedabad. Harsh's heart broke into pieces watching their wedding pictures on social media.

The same social media that had helped him get Aayushi was giving him unbearable pain. In anger, he deleted his Instagram and Facebook accounts.

Chapter 15

Every human seeks love at some point in his/her life. There are no specific findings or any reason behind why we strive for love.

I think it's the essence of our very being, but when this force of love is stopped because of religious misbeliefs, the same love becomes a revolution. ***A Revolution was about to begin.***

It had been a week since Sagar and Malar returned from Dr. Meera's Clinic, and Harsh got secretly engaged to Khushboo. But things still looked gloomy in their lives.

It was a Sunday. Sagar and Malar decided to meet on the terrace at 6pm. At 5:30pm, Sagar called Harsh again as they hadn't been in touch during the last week. Harsh was not answering Sagar's calls. This time he answered the call.

"Bolo Bhai," Sagar said cheerfully as usual.

"Bas Bhai. Just going on," Harsh sounded out of the vibe.

Sagar sensed it, "Bhai, why do you sound low."

"Nothing Bhai, just worked out a bit more yesterday. So my body is tired," Harsh lied. He didn't want to talk about Aayushi or his engagement with anyone. Not even to Sagar.

"Oh! Do one thing, Bhai, come to my building. Let's sit on the terrace and breathe some fresh air in." Sagar was dramatic this time. Harsh stayed just 15 minutes away from Sagar's building. Harsh thought for a few seconds. Last week, he had been at home the whole time. No office and no gym. He felt so weak, as if someone had sucked all the energy from him.

"Okay, see you in an hour," Harsh agreed.

At 6pm, the sun was about to set. It was the month of December, and all Mumbaikars started to feel the first touch of winter. The sky turned orange and purple when Malar reached the terrace with a bottle of water. She was feeling optimistic and had a smile on her face.

She pulled both her hands up and stretched her back. She felt good when she saw the sky and the sun that was about to set.

Things were gradually improving for Malar since her last visit to the clinic. She started to view life with a positive approach.

She started eating bananas first thing in the morning, and within Two days, her constipation started to decrease. She also told her manager at the office that she would leave every day at 7 pm no matter what because of her health. She didn't mind if they lowered her salary or package.

Malar's mother was happy as her daughter ate dinner with her throughout the week. Malar also felt good because she got to discover a wholly new and caring side of Sagar. They didn't meet throughout the week, but Sagar would call or message her to ask whether she had her medicines or generally ask her how she was feeling.

He also told Malar, "If the nightmares come again, just call me." He sent her links to curated articles on how to heal thyroid. Malar knew Sagar was sorry for being absent for a significant time, and his efforts showed it.

Her thoughts were broken by Sagar, "Hey, bro, what's up." He raised his hand for a high five.

"What is bro?" Malar asked, giving back the high five.

"Bro is the new swag bro. College kids nowadays call each other bro. Ladka ladki sabko bro," Sagar explained in great detail.

"But we are not college kids, bro," Malar also joined the "Bro-calling-squad."

"But we can act like one na, bro. Hahaha!" Sagar had this weird habit of laughing at his own jokes.

Malar looked at him weirdly and said, "Bahut ho gaya yeh bro, let's sit on the water tank."

Sagar followed her instructions. Once seated, Sagar pulled out something from his jeans pocket. It was a 20 cm long transparent sticker.

"I brought something for you," He said and gave the sticker to Malar.

Malar rolled the sticker out. There was something written on it which read.

"You Are Beautiful"

Malar was silent after reading it. She knew why Sagar gave this to her. She thanked Sagar for his genuine efforts.

"You have to stick this on the top of your bathroom mirror," Sagar explained because he knew Malar just needed to gain her confidence back, and he genuinely believed in her beauty.

Malar understood the purpose behind the sticker. She rolled it back. She patted hard on Sagar's shoulder.

"Thanks, bro, for this and thanks for coming with me to the doctor and also for keeping a tab on me throughout the week."

Sagar replied, "Bas kya? Saying thanks to a friend, chal chal drink your water on time." Malar laughed and sipped some water.
Sagar's phone rang. He picked it up. "Yes, bhai. Take the lift in the A-wing to come to the 4th floor. I am here already," He hung up.
Malar asked with a confused facial expression, "Who's this?"
"Arre you know na, my school friend Harsh. He is bored, and he stays nearby. So I called him up to get some famous fresh air on the terrace," Sagar winked.
Malar was like, "Okay, this is something new."
Harsh got into the lift, reached the 4th floor when his phone rang. It was an unknown number. He answered it. It was Khushboo. It's been a week since their engagement, but Harsh didn't try to contact her.
"Hello," Harsh said.
"Hi, Harsh. Khushboo, this side," She said. Now, it was awkward for both of them.
"Oh, Hi!" Harsh kept it minimum.
"It's been one week since we met, so I thought I'll call," Khushboo explained.

Harsh wondered what he could possibly talk to her about. "What should I tell her? That I decided to get engaged to her just because she has a lot of money and I wanted to take revenge on my girlfriend, who married another boy just for money?
"Oh, yes! Actually, I was busy with work, and right now, I am driving. Can I call you back later?" Harsh lied.
"Okay, Sure," Khushboo said and hung up.

Harsh switched off the phone in frustration, took a deep breath, and went towards the terrace.

As he reached the terrace, the first thing he noticed was the fresh evening air he breathed in. It had been ages since he strolled on a building terrace. He observed the sky, which looked calming. He also heard the sounds of different birds who were returning back to their abode.

He saw Sagar. His back was turned towards him, and he saw a girl who was laughing. Harsh guessed that Sagar might have cracked a lame joke. But who was this girl? Sagar's girlfriend? No, that was not possible. He was into Devaki just a few days back. "Why didn't Sagar tell me that a girl was also there up with him?" Harsh thought while walking towards Sagar.

Malar was the first one to see Harsh. The first thing about him that struck her was his well-built body. She kept looking at him, and when Sagar saw Malar's face, he also turned to see Harsh.
"Hello, bro! Welcome to our terrace. Here you get peace and fresh air for free, 24 hours." Sagar welcomed Harsh in a loud voice. He was on the verge of hugging him, but Harsh just shook hands with him.
"Thanks, Bhai, but what's this bro thing?" Harsh said as he wondered about the reason behind Sagar's over-excited, weird behavior. And listening to this, Malar laughed.

Harsh looked at her. He saw her eyes getting wider, and he also observed Malar's dimpled cheeks when she smiled.
Malar noticed Harsh staring at her. She said, "Actually, I laughed because I also asked him the same question. Why is he calling everyone bro?" she laughed again, and looking at her, Harsh also smiled. This time Malar also saw Harsh's smile. She noticed that Harsh's eyes got smaller when he smiled.
Sagar kicked in, "I forgot to introduce you two."
"So Malar, this is Harsh, my school buddy. He also stays in Malad on Haji Bapu Road."
"And Harsh, she is Malar. We reside in the same building, and she is my childhood friend." Both Harsh and Malar shook hands and greeted each other with a warm smile.
"Come, Harsh, sit here," Sagar spoke as both Harsh, and Sagar sat on the water tank. Harsh sat next to Sagar, and Sagar sat next to Malar.

Chapter 16

"Where were you last week? No calls, no messages," Sagar asked Harsh.

Now Harsh couldn't tell Sagar the truth, especially not in front of Malar as he didn't know her.

"I was busy with work. The new stock of plywood had arrived, so I was stocking, counting, and properly sending it to the clients. Lots of work, you see," Harsh masterfully lied.
Listening to this, Malar wanted to ask him what he exactly does, but she kept quiet as she thought asking someone his profession was the most boring thing ever.

Harsh turned to look at Malar. She was looking towards the sun and towards nothingness. As the wind was blowing, she tucked her hair behind her right ear.
At the cost of not looking rude, Harsh asked Malar, "So Malar, what do you do? You know, like work-related stuff!" Harsh was trembling by the time he finished his sentence. He mentally cursed himself for not being able to construct a simple sentence properly.
Malar looked at Harsh in his eyes. She smiled a little and said,
"I am a chartered accountant. I work in an M.N.C. in Bombay."
Sagar interrupted, "Why do you say you work in Bombay? Mumbai and Bombay are one and the same. Why do you have to specifically show off that you work in the town? And we all stay here in the suburbs of Mumbai, not Bombay."
"Arre Bhai, what she meant by calling it Bombay was that she worked in the town, and even today people who work or stay in the town call Mumbai as Bombay." Harsh also didn't know why he defended Malar.
Listening to this, Malar started laughing. She said, "Sagar, your friend is smarter than you. This is the reason your three-page letter got rejected."
Malar laughed even more. Both Harsh and Sagar kept looking at her. After a few seconds, Malar realized that she shouldn't have mentioned the love letter in front of Harsh as Sagar might not have told him anything about it.
"Oh, Sorry. I was just joking," Malar apologized.
This time Harsh and Sagar looked at each other and started laughing.
Harsh was the one to speak, "I know everything about his love letter chronicles."
Listening to Harsh, Malar said, "You know, I warned him before sending it. I told him that it was too early to send such a letter."
Sagar replied with a lot of elegance. Almost as if he was preaching on life lessons, "Life is all about falling down and getting up again."
Harsh wanted to say, "Chutiya katne ke baad sab yeh hi kehte hai," but he refrained and just laughed.

Malar listened to what Sagar said and couldn't control it. She said, "Chutiya katne ke baad sab yeh hi kehte hai," she laughed hysterically.
The irony of the situation was that the three of them had been dumped. Harsh was shocked when he heard Malar. "How can she read my mind or is it just a coincidence..?" He just kept looking at Malar laughing.

Sagar, on the other hand, was happy to see Malar laughing after such a long time. To make the situation more comfortable, he said, "I shouldn't have called Harsh; you two are ganging up against me."
"Awww, my Sagar baby felt bad? I am sorry," Malar said, pulling Sagar's cheeks.
Harsh saw the comfort zone Sagar and Malar shared. He just kept his smile intact.
"Stop it, Malar, my cheeks hurt!" Sagar faked his anger and tried to pull Malar's cheeks.
"Now, you will come to know how hard you pulled my cheeks," Sagar said.
But before Sagar could succeed, Malar jumped off the water tank. Now, she was standing in front of both the boys.
Sagar recalled that he had to say something vital.
"Enough, Malar, now listen to me carefully."
"Yes, Sir," Malar said, still grinning.
Sagar said, looking at Harsh,
"So, you are a gym freak. I want your help."
Harsh nodded.
Sagar continued, "Actually, Malar is looking towards joining a gym nearby. It would be really cool if you help her with the gym admission and the exercise routine."

Harsh didn't expect this, but this was the first time someone asked for his help regarding his favorite thing. He said, "Sure, I will help."

Malar also didn't expect this from Sagar. Looking at Harsh, she could tell he was super fit and that she was totally unfit. She had to say no to it anyhow.
She showed her eyes to Sagar angrily and said,
"Why are you troubling him? Right now, I don't want to join the gym. I will do it next month."
"If you don't go to the gym tomorrow, I will call Dr. Meera and complain about you."

Sagar knew this trick would work. Malar started to feel awkward. She thought what a fit guy like Harsh would think about her fat body.

Harsh saw Malar's facial expressions. She was not comfortable. Their eyes met for the first time.

Harsh spoke, "Don't worry so much. Just come for a day. If you feel good about it, then you can continue".

This time Malar couldn't say no. She just said, "Okay."

Sagar spoke, "That's great! So Malar, what time will be good for you?"

Malar thought and said, "Probably at 9pm."

"Actually, I go in the morning…." Harsh was about to say more when Malar interrupted.

"It's completely okay if you are not free at night. We can go some other day."

"Take a chill pill. It's completely fine for me. Can you do one thing? Just take my number and call me tomorrow when you are ready," Harsh said with a smile.

Malar felt good when Harsh adjusted his time for her. She thanked him and took out her mobile. Harsh shared his number with her. Malar saved it as "Harsh Gym." Then she called that number. But it was switched off.

"It's switched off," Malar told Harsh.

"Oh yes, my battery is dead. Can you WhatsApp me saying, Hi? I will save your number from there," Harsh said.

That night when Harsh switched on his phone, there was a WhatsApp message from an unknown number.

"Hey, Harsh! Malar this side. I couldn't say it in front of Sagar, but if you are not comfortable, then it's okay."

Harsh laughed and replied, "It's completely okay. Don't worry."

Next, he saved her number as "Malar."

He wondered what the name "Malar" meant. Instinctively he messaged Malar.

"What does your name mean?"

When Malar received this message from Harsh, the first thing she checked was his D.P. Harsh was not wearing a t-shirt and showing off his well-built physique. She kept looking at it and later replied to his message.

"Malar means, *the way*."

Malar couldn't pinpoint how she felt that night as it was the first time someone had asked her the meaning of her name.

Chapter 17

The next day was an ordinary Monday for many but indeed not for Harsh and Malar.
Harsh kept thinking about how a girl agreed to exercise at the gym with him when he just met her a day ago? He also remembered that Sagar said something about Dr. Meera. Did Malar have any health problems?
He was at his office, but his mind was occupied by the thought of Malar. For the first time, someone was interested not in his physique but in the process of how he built it up. His ex-girlfriend Aayushi was attracted to his body but never asked him how hard he had worked in the gym, and Khushboo didn't even notice his body.
The moment he saw Malar looking towards the sun into nothingness made a home inside him. That visual kept flashing in his mind.
Malar, on the other hand, took a leave that day. Since last night, she thought about going to the gym with a boy she had met just a day ago. She was nervous, and fear crept up in her mind. What if she couldn't exercise properly? How will others look at her when she would exercise? Which exercises were required to be performed for losing weight?
There were many questions in her mind but only confusion in the name of answers. Another question came up in her mind, and she instantly googled. "What should fat girls wear to the gym?"
She read a few articles and decided to go shopping. She usually went shopping with her mom, but she decided to kick the game alone that day as her mom was at the office.
In the afternoon, she took an auto and reached the Inorbit mall in Malad West. Once inside the mall, she directly went to the Nike showroom. There, a young assistant approached Malar.
"Yes, Ma'am, how may I help you?" He asked politely.
"Actually, I am joining the gym today, so I was looking for some gym clothes and shoes," Malar said awkwardly.
"Sure, Ma'am. Let me first show you sports shoes," the assistant said.
He quickly showed her a few sports shoes. The one Malar liked was black in color with a pink logo of Nike.

"What's the cost of this one?" she asked.
"Ma'am, it's 15k," the assistant said with confidence.
"Why is this so expensive?" Malar asked the assistant as the cost of other shoes was under 10k.
"Actually, ma'am, the shoes you are holding were worn by Serena Williams during her tennis match."
Malar thought for a few seconds. She felt that if Serena Williams, whom she didn't know before that day, had used those shoes during her tennis game, the shoes would definitely be worth it. She instantly bought them. She also bought a pair of black yoga bottoms, a sports bra, fitness t-shirts of blue color and grey color, and a hoodie.
She felt good as it was after a long time that she did some shopping. She also had a sada dosa and a cup of filter coffee after the shopping.
It turned out to be a good day for her until she realized that the main challenge was way ahead of her.
Malar checked the time. It was 8pm already. Just one hour to go. She was nervous and had her own fears to fight.
When she was with her own people like Sagar and her mother, she knew they didn't judge her or give a damn about how she looked, but that day she was going out in front of some unknown people to exercise, and that made her vulnerable.
Finally, after 10 minutes of playing with the thought of whether she could go to the gym or not, she got up and put on the exercise clothes that she had bought from the Nike showroom and went inside the bathroom to look in the mirror.
A flood of negative thoughts hit her. What would people think when her oversized body parts would bounce while exercising?
What would happen if some men would stare at her body?
She turned around to check her body in the mirror, and at that moment, she lost hope. In the yoga pants she was wearing, her butts looked really big and made her feel uncomfortable. Another thought knocked her morale down - what if people kept looking at her butt when she exercised?
Tears welled up in her eyes, and she thought, "Why am I in such an uncomfortable position in my life?"
"Why does this damn thyroid have to stick to me and increase my weight unevenly in specific parts of my body."

Suddenly her phone rang and brought her back to the present moment. She wiped out her tears and went out to take her phone.
It was Dr. Meera's call. Malar picked up the call.
"Hey Malar, Sagar just messaged me that you are joining the gym today," Dr. Meera sounded positive and cheerful.
"Doctor, I don't think I can go to a gym ever." Malar sounded defeated.
"Why, girl? What happened?"
Malar shared her deep dark insecurities with her.
"Malar in the gym, everyone is fighting his/her own battles, so no one really gives a damn about how anyone looks, and to give you a role model, I have someone," Dr. Meera explained calmly.
"Who?" Malar asked.
"Have you heard of Serena Williams?"
"I heard about her today. I just know that she plays tennis," Malar answered honestly.
"Okay, keep the call on speaker and google about her. See how she looks."
Malar did as told, and she saw a picture of Serena where she was playing tennis with the confidence that she could win the whole world.
Malar noticed her body color, which was black, but her body, which looked curvy, bulky, and well in shape.
Malar realized why Dr. Meera had asked her to see Serena's pictures.
Dr. Meera continued on the phone.
"Malar, Serena Williams is one of the greatest tennis players in the world. But, every time she comes out to play, she is always criticized for her clothes and the weight that she has put on after giving birth to her baby."
"People always say that Serena has such a curvy body. People question her wearing tight clothes, but Malar, when she goes to play out there, she kicks her opponent's butts' with her game and attitude." Malar understood what Dr. Meera was trying to get at. She needed her motivation at that point.
"Thanks, Doctor." Malar would be eternally grateful for Dr. Meera's help and guidance.
"Malar, it doesn't matter how small or big your butt is or how people see you or judge you. What matters is how you see yourself." Malar remembered something. She hung up the call after thanking the doctor once again.
She now had the confidence that she was looking for. She pulled out the sticker that Sagar had gifted her that day. She went inside the bathroom and

stuck the sticker on the top of the mirror.
She looked into her eyes in the mirror, smiled, and read out what the sticker said.
"I am beautiful."

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Harsh put on his best black track pants and favorite grey gym tee, which said, "Let's Make Muscles." He also set his hair with gel and looked in the mirror. He saw himself ripped and ready.
Sharp at 9pm, he was standing outside his gym. He expected Malar to call or message him about her whereabouts, but there was no such notification from her.
"Did she drop her plan..?"
"Should I call her to ask..?"
"How can I call a girl directly?"
Harsh had many thoughts, but they were broken when his phone rang. It was Malar.
"Hi Harsh, sorry I am late. I am on my way. Can you just guide me to the address?" Malar spoke, sitting inside the auto-rickshaw.
Harsh guided her, and within five minutes, Malar was standing on the opposite side of Harsh. He saw her even before she realized.
Malar paid the rickshaw guy and turned around. This time she saw Harsh. She smiled and said, "Hi." raising her hand. She crossed the road.
"Hey!" Harsh said, just smiling.
"Hello! I am so sorry I am late," Malar also spoke with a smile.
"Oh, that's totally fine! Should we go inside?" Harsh asked. He was feeling nervous, looking at Malar. He just couldn't make eye contact with her.
"Yes, let's go," Malar spoke with excitement, and they walked into the gym.

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First, Harsh helped Malar with the registration and payment of the fees. Next, he asked her to keep her bag inside his locker and put on her shoes. They both were ready, and finally, entered the main area of the gym. The color of the gym was black and red. There was loud music playing, and everyone working out were busy with themselves. No one even looked at Harsh and Malar, who just entered.
"Let's go to the warm-up zone," Harsh said. Malar nodded.

At the warm-up zone, both Malar and Harsh were facing the mirror and standing next to each other.
"Before every workout, it is compulsory to do the warm-up, and it's mostly the same for everyone. So, let's start," Harsh explained.
"Okay." Malar nodded like the sincere student that she always was, and they both started. He instructed, and she followed. They both did some twists, shoulder rotations, neck movements, and a few legs stretches.
"Okay, let's start with our exercise. Today we will do a very light workout as it is your first day. Do you know how to do squats?" Harsh asked.
"No." Malar was honest, and she felt good watching Harsh help her.
She looked around and saw two extremely slim girls pass by her. Malar thought that she could not be like them, slim and firm. Harsh understood what she was thinking.
"Hey, let's start. I will show you how to do it. Focus! Don't look here and there," Harsh snapped at her.
"Arree, sorry, sorry!" Malar regained her focus and stood tall.
Harsh performed a perfect squat. Malar saw it with attention. Next, Malar tried to do it, but Harsh stopped her.
"No, no! Not like this. Your hips should go down, and with that, your knees will automatically bend," Harsh explained.
Nervousness was growing more and more around Harsh. He had not felt like this with any girl in his life. Malar became conscious when she heard the word "hips." She looked around to check if anyone was watching her. She tried doing squats, but every time she went down, she was bending her knees before taking her buttocks back. It was not perfect, and Harsh didn't like it.
"Malar, wait! You are not doing it right. Wait, I will help you."
It took him a lot of courage to do what he did next. He went behind Malar.
"Increase the gap between your legs and keep your toes pointed out," Harsh commanded. Malar did what was said.
"Now, just keep in mind to take your hips down as if you are trying to sit on a chair. I will help you," Harsh said and kept his hands on Malar's waist. This was the first time they had touched each other. "Start," Harsh said loudly.
Malar kept her hips stable and pushed them down. Harsh held her waist to stabilize her core and hips. Finally, she did her first perfect squat.

"Come on, very good! We will do 20 squats," Harsh shouted and motivated Malar.
In the duration of 20 squats, Malar's and Harsh bodies were in contact. They both had feelings that were unknown to them. But, both felt empowered, especially Malar, Other than Nimit, no one had ever touched her. But this touch by Harsh felt intimate and secure.
After the 20 squats were completed, Harsh said, "Very good!"
Malar extended her hand forward. Harsh shook it. Malar looked at him with invisible tears in her eyes.
In the next one hour, Harsh helped Malar with all the exercises. More than the touch, it was about the feelings that they had shared with each other.

Chapter 18

The entire universe works in a mysterious way, and there are still many questions out there to which the answers are unknown to human beings. One of those questions is, "Why do a boy and a girl unknown to each other meet each other out of nowhere and fall in love?"

Harsh and Malar came out of the gym at 10:30pm. "So, how are you feeling after your first workout?" Harsh asked.

He felt the same enthusiasm that he had felt when he had come out of the gym for the first time.

"I feel fresh. I thought exercise would be tough, but you made it easy," Malar expressed herself genuinely.

"Oh, come on, yaar! I just shared what I have learned in the last year or so," Harsh smiled.

"Oh, you were also overweight, kya..?" Malar asked once again, observing how good Harsh's physique looked after the workout session.

"No, no, it was the other way round. I was skinny and low on confidence," Harsh said, explaining through his gestures and showed his one-year-old pic from his phone.

"Oh my god! How did you do it in just a year?" Malar was shocked to see Harsh's transformation. She started respecting him a few minutes back, when he had helped her with the exercise without even caring how she looked. He was just there, helping. But now, watching Harsh's transformation, her respect for him grew even more.

"It's very typical to advise others to never give up and be consistent, but the secret is what it is, never give up and keep exercising and eating right," Harsh spoke from his experience.

By now, both of them were walking towards Harsh's scooty, which was parked in a nearby lane. Most of the shops were closed. There was less noise, and more peace in the lane; Harsh and Malar were walking.

They both were completely present with each other and unavailable to the world around them. They stopped under a street light, where Harsh's scooty was parked.

"I want to make a confession," Malar said, looking into Harsh's eyes.

"Yes?" Harsh nodded. He was curious.
"I didn't want to come today because I assumed everyone would judge me on the basis of how I look. Looking at you made me more nervous because you are super fit, and I am super unfit," She laughed, hiding her pains, insecurities behind the mask of laughter.
But Harsh saw in her eyes that something was not right.
He kept looking into her eyes and said, "Malar, when I joined the gym, for the first 6 months, nothing happened. I didn't put on even 500 gm. There was no one to guide me, and slowly I started losing hope. But then I saw a video of a bodybuilder who didn't have legs but still worked out every day, changed everything, and here I am standing right in front of you. No one cares how unfit or fit we are; it just depends on how much we care." Harsh ended his short monologue. His eyes had a look as if imaginary people were clapping around him for his speech.
Malar touched Harsh's arm. It was one of those touches where she was trying to say more than her words could convey.
"Thanks for your words; you cannot imagine how much I needed them," Malar said with a spark in her eyes.
"You're welcome," Harsh replied with a smile. A smile worth everything.

His phone rang; he pulled it out. It was his father, so he silenced it and kept it back. Malar sensed it and said,
"I think it's time to go."
"Yes, sure, sit back; I will drop you," Harsh asked nonchalantly.
"Arre no, I will get an auto."
"It's tough to get an auto from here at this time, and don't worry, I will not take money from you, no matter how expensive it is," Harsh said with enough sarcasm to crack Malar up.
She laughed and said, "Okay".

Harsh got on the scooty, started it, and took a turn. Then Malar sat back, and there they went riding, but there was one more thing unknown to Malar. She was the first girl sitting as a pillion rider with Harsh. Harsh felt like the hero of a movie still unmade. From above, the moon also smiled, looking at them.

That night was special for both of them lying on their beds; Malar thought about all the moments when Harsh had touched her to help her during the workout. She felt complete and safe. Those touches were full of hope and encouragement. She felt that there was genuinely someone who

didn't care about how she looked and just saw her as a normal human being without any flaws. She was looking forward to meeting Harsh the next day.

Harsh thought about how finally someone respected his hard work. He felt useful and purposeful. Malar's smile and her eyes kept flashing in his mind, and he just kept smiling. He thought that finally, there was someone who wanted his help for his skills and ability. This was his achievement, which was completely owned by him. He also thought about when Malar touched him on his arm. That touch felt very satisfying and unreal. He wanted more of it.

He closed his eyes to sleep, but sleep looked far fetched that night. He was looking forward to meeting Malar the next day.

Chapter 19

Sagar had a lot of questions running inside his head. First, Devaki rejected him straight on his face without any explanations. Nothing. Just a plain no. Second, he came to know that Malar was suffering from thyroid, and she didn't tell him because he was wasting his time impressing someone who didn't even matter. But, what was it that really mattered to Sagar? This question kept him distressed.

He had seen people of his age around him straight out of college; they were full of life - wanting to earn a lot of money and making it big in life. Sagar didn't have any motivation for money. One reason for this was that he had started earning when he was 17, so by now, he was financially at a sound stage, and things were growing slowly.

But inside him, there was this void feeling which was growing. In the last week, the only question he has been asking himself was, "What's the purpose of my life?", "What's my reason to live?"

And he had developed emptiness after he, Malar, and Harsh had been together on the terrace. "I haven't achieved anything big," he realized this straight in his head, and now he didn't want to feel like a loser anymore.

It was Tuesday, and he was thinking about all this while drinking his morning tea. He told his parents he wouldn't go to work today as he was feeling low. His parents left, and now he was all alone thinking about all the questions again and again. One thing he realized was that he couldn't just continue his life the way it was going. He needed a fire to burn and spark to live.

After a long time, he switched on the TV out of the blue to divert his mind for a bit. He scrolled through the movies channel, but nothing was being aired apart from some dubbed South Indian action movies. So he headed for the news section.

He selected the first channel, which was DD news. The first image he saw was of a hall inside Rashtrapati Bhavan, and the Padma awards distribution ceremony was going on. Sagar always wanted to know how the government gave people awards, so he kept the remote aside and continued watching

what was happening inside the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The function was airing live.

Sagar was mesmerized by the sheer aura and positivity which he saw on the screen. The hall was fully packed with the President of India standing on stage, the Prime Minister and other Ministers sitting in the first row. The family members of the awardees occupied the other rows. One by one, the names were being announced, and then that person would come forward for felicitation by the President.

Sagar was excited watching all this. He saw Gautam Gambhir being awarded Padma Shri for a remarkable contribution to cricket. Manoj Bajpayee was being awarded the same for his acting skills but what captured Sagar's attention was that the awards were not only given to famous people. Many ordinary people were being awarded the Padma Shri for their contribution to the country's development, and that blew his mind away.

He saw a lady named Smt. Saalumarada Thimmakka from Karnataka going on stage. She was 107 years old and was being awarded for her social work. She was known for planting Banyan trees along a 4 km stretch of highway near her village. She was wearing an elegant orange and green saree when she received the Padma Shri from the President. Her smile during that moment expressed happiness, peace, and contentment.

Next, he saw a lady named Smt Chinapillai from Tamil Nadu. She was wearing a red South Indian saree and walked with pride when the President announced her name. First, she bowed down in front of the President as a sign of respect and then went on stage. She was given the Padma Shri for her work towards women empowerment and socio-economic transformation of underprivileged people in and around her village. She smiled when the President gave her the award. Her eyes behind her round specs closed when she smiled, and her teeth showed. There was this childlike innocence on her face. She knew she had done something worthwhile in her life.

Sagar was interested in all those people. He saw the ceremony till the end, and for that amount of time, he forgot where he was, who he was and why he was. All that mattered to him was the smile that people from different parts of the country displayed. He might have never known people were winning awards for their work, and their work didn't require marketing or power. It just needed the human spirit.

Sagar thought to himself, "What if I also had such passion and human spirit inside me for work?". How would it feel having such a deep purpose that transcends physical, mental, and financial boundaries? Sagar finally had a smile on his face; he knew he just had to discover a purpose bigger than him.

Later in the evening, Sagar went down to the streets near his building for a stroll to observe everything happening around him.

Till now, the day had passed consciously. As if after a long, long time, he realized how time was passing and how every single minute added up to make an hour. He made his lunch, his favorite bread cheese omelet, washed all the dishes, and removed all the books from his cupboard. There were more than 250 books which were lying on the floor. Sagar smelled most of them and realized how he had started collecting them when he was in the 9th standard. He cleaned all the books with a dry cloth, kept them back, and felt good. Sagar felt as if he met many of his old friends living inside the cupboard for a long time.

He also called Malar to ask her about her first day at the gym and how she felt. From Malar's replies, Sagar felt good because she sounded positive and proactive, and his plan to connect Harsh with her was successful. He wanted someone who went to the gym regularly to help her, and Harsh was perfect for the part.

By 5 pm, when it was dusk, and the sun was about to set, Sagar made tea for himself. It was his favorite beverage, and he was impressed by the taste of his own chai. Next, he took a hot water bath, which helped him in getting over the stress. He kept asking himself, "Why was he sent to this planet?" Sagar was habitual of talking to himself during his bath. He did not get his answers, but he would ask important questions. By the time he was wrapping the towel around his waist, he had asked himself, "Did I really love Devaki or was it just an illusion and loneliness which made me believe that I loved her?"

He came out of the bathroom, changed into a comfortable blue t-shirt and jeans, and decided to go for a walk.

His building was situated on the station road so during the evening it was full of people going to their houses. He kept strolling as if the people around him didn't matter to him. Just his own questions occupied him. Why did he waste so much time on Devaki to make her fall in love with him?

Indeed it was not love, he just wanted to fulfill his emptiness, and when he saw Devaki, he was physically attracted to her and thought it was love; Sagar realized.
He also realized that he couldn't go on like that trying to convince girls to love him. Life is much more than this. He wanted to do something which would stay around for a long period. But how?
Answering his own questions, Sagar had reached Ramleela Maidan, and his self-talk was broken by loud sounds of Dhol, which were coming from inside. He saw a group of boys playing Nashik Dhol. All of them were wearing white kurta and pajamas with traditional red bandi over it. Their music pumped up Sagar. He felt the energy build up inside his body.
He went near the group and observed them, and suddenly in the all-boys group, Sagar saw a girl playing a Dhol. She then came forward, and he realized that she was leading the group.
Sagar saw a huge Dhol tied around her waist, and she was jumping as if the Dhol's weight didn't matter to her. What mattered to her was the music that came out of it. Sagar's thoughts were empty. He just stood there watching her face and smile, which she expressed every time she banged the Dhol with all her might.
Her silver jhumkas also danced when she moved with the beats of the music. The music reached its zenith, and the entire group was playing dhols as if all of them were connected to each other through a divine energy.
No caste, color, age, weight, height, gender mattered because everyone played the same music and all the dhols played the same way.
Sagar didn't know what his purpose was, but he knew how a purpose looked. The girl's eyes had it, and it looked as if the world around her was one with her.
Sagar took out his phone and recorded the group playing Nashik Dhol. He kept the focus on the girl for a few seconds and saw how her face shined. There was this little bindi on her forehead, which looked cute to Sagar.
He then walked out of the ground towards his house and knew one thing. He wanted the spark in his eyes that the girl had reflected while playing Dhol.

Chapter 20

Can love happen in a day, or does it take a lifetime?
Harsh and Malar had similar yet different starts to their day. Both woke up with the thought of each other. Harsh thought about how Malar was grateful to him. Never in his life before, he felt so important. A smile appeared on his face. He punched in the air with excitement and got out of his bed. For a brief moment, he had forgotten about his real-life, but soon he was brought back to reality at the breakfast table by his father.
"Harsh, I called Khushboo yesterday," His father said while sipping his tea.
For a second, Harsh looked up while eating his oats upma.
"She said that she called you on Sunday, but you didn't call her back," His father's voice was demanding now.
Harsh put his spoon down, looked up, and said with a straight face, "I forgot Papa; there is a lot of work in the office nowadays."
"Harsh, it just takes five minutes to make a call. You have all the time in the world to go to that stupid gym, but you can't call her? Call her today, after you come home from the office and only then go to the gym," He said, almost giving a command.
Harsh couldn't process how the question of him going to the gym came up in between the argument. He remained silent. His oats upma had turned cold by then.
After a few minutes, Harsh's father got up from his chair and went to stand near Harsh, keeping his hand on Harsh shoulder. His voice was low and persuasive.
"Beta, many boys from our samaj, want to marry Khushboo for her father's money, but they have chosen you because you are one good boy. If you behave like this, they will not think for a single minute before breaking this engagement, and your whole life will be destroyed. So start talking with Khushboo; your bright future is waiting for you."
Harsh was fuming with anger by the time his father ended the speech, "How would my life be destroyed by the engagement being called off?", "Why did money matter so much in his bloody samaj?"

Such questions made a corner in his mind. But then he realized that Aayushi had also left him for money. This was a never-ending argument.
Harsh just managed to reply, "Ok."
All his stress and problematic thoughts vanished when his phone beeped. It was a WhatsApp text from Malar. He quickly opened it.
Malar wrote, "Can I have upma for breakfast..?"
Reading that message, Harsh smiled and even started eating his cold oats upma.

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Malar reached outside the gym in a rickshaw five minutes before 9 pm. She was excited about that day's workout and was waiting for Harsh to arrive, looking on both sides of the road, imagining Harsh riding his scooty. This thought made her realize that since the morning, she had been thinking about him.
First, she woke up with the thought of him. She wondered what he might be thinking about her.
During breakfast, Malar's mom made upma, so before eating, she texted Harsh to ask him if she could eat it.
His instant reply was, "Yes, you can. Hot homemade breakfast is always good. Such a coincidence, I am also eating oats upma".
Malar paused and thought whether it was really a coincidence or something more. While traveling and also at the office, whenever Malar saw a guy with a well-built body, she would think of Harsh, and she would tell herself mentally, "His body is better."
That evening, the pantry manager at Malar's office came to her desk and gave her a box of Kaju katlis. He said,
"Malar madam, Lakshmi ji arrived at my place yesterday."
Malar got up from her chair and hugged Mishra ji.
"Congratulations, Mishra uncle! When did aunty deliver?"
"Today morning. That's why I came late. See this photo." Mishra ji showed his newborn daughter's photo to Malar on his mobile.
Malar took his phone and kissed the screen. "Bilkul aap hi ki taraha dikhti hain yeh, Mishra uncle."
“Badi hokar usko bhi aap he ke taraha C.A banana hain.”
“Mishra ji phele use badi toh hone do fir jo usska mann kahega kar legi.”
Malar said while eating a Kaju Katli.

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It was 9 pm already, and Harsh was still at his house. He saw Malar's message, "I reached. Where are you?"
He replied, "Reaching in 10 mins."
His father again reminded him to call Khushboo, and he knew that he had no option but to do it. So finally, for the first time, he called Khushboo.
"Hi," Harsh said.
"Hey, finally you called," Khushboo said without sounding sarcastic.
"I am sorry I couldn't call you back on Sunday. I completely forgot," Harsh knew he was terrible at faking it.
"Hey! It's completely fine. I know it's awkward for both of us as we don't know each other. Even if our parents force us, we can still keep it simple," Khushboo sounded genuine.
"Thanks for understanding," Harsh couldn't think of anything else to say.
"So what's up? What were you doing?" Khushboo asked in a tone as if she was up for a good chat.
"Actually, I was about to go to the gym," Harsh spoke the truth.
"Oh, then you carry on. We will talk later." Khushboo wanted to talk with her to-be-husband or whatever relation they shared, but she didn't want to sound desperate, so she let it go.
"Oh, thanks again for understanding! I will call you over the weekend, for sure. And one more thing, if anyone from my family calls you then, please tell them that we are talking regularly," Harsh said everything quickly because he wanted to go to the gym quickly to exercise or to say it better; he wanted to work out with Malar.
Before Khushboo could say anything, the call was disconnected, and Harsh was gone.

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At 9:15 pm, Malar saw Harsh in a rickshaw that stopped on the opposite side of the road. For a good two minutes, it looked to her that Harsh had a heated argument with the rickshaw driver. Then the rickshaw driver took a u-turn and stopped in front of the gym.
The first thing Harsh said as he got out of the rickshaw was, "I am extremely sorry! I was stuck with some work and had to keep you waiting."
"It's completely fine! Why didn't you bring your scooty?" Malar asked because she wanted Harsh to drop her outside her building today also. The

close proximity that she felt between them the day before was still there.
"My father wanted to go somewhere, so he took it," Harsh said as they made their way into the gym.
"Oh, you know from the opposite side, it looked as if you were having an argument with the rickshaw driver," Malar said.
"Oh, that. He refused to take the u-turn, so I said I wouldn't pay him until he would take a u-turn," Harsh explained again and realized that Malar was observing him closely.
"Ok," Malar couldn't say more because she was confused as to why someone would fight just for an u-turn. Harsh could have easily crossed the road in two seconds, but she kept her thoughts to herself.
Inside the gym, Harsh asked Malar to check her weight before starting the workout. He said, "I always check my weight before the workout. It reminds us of our goal and where we have to reach."
"Is it necessary?" Malar was conscious of her weight and feared what Harsh would think about her.
Harsh saw the fear in her eyes. He kept his hand on her shoulder and said, "Come on, Malar, face your fears, the weighing scale just shows your present and not your future, and I am sure your future is bright."
Malar got confident hearing Harsh's words, and she stepped up on the scale. Her weight was 82 kgs. As soon as Harsh saw it, Malar got conscious and defended herself.
"Actually, I have thyroid, and this weight is the result of that."
Harsh was laughing. Malar was shocked. She asked
"Why are you laughing?"
"Malar, never ever in your life say that you have thyroid. You don't have it. The thyroid is just a discomfort in your body, which will heal in due time. But if you say you have it, then it will surely stay forever." Malar was stunned for a moment.
"Why didn't I see it that way?" She thought.
"Harsh, I really love how you see and interpret things. A big thank you to you, buddy," Malar said and extended her hand.
Harsh shook it, and the touch felt warm to both of them. In the next hour, they worked out, and all the unintentional touches they shared between them while exercising were writing an unknown story. During the workout, Harsh kept thinking about how Malar had used the word "Love" for the first

time during their conversation, and it felt special. It felt good, and it felt moving.

Chapter 21

After 90 minutes of workout, Malar and Harsh came out of the gym. Both looked fresh and drained at the same time. The air outside was cold, and somehow it felt warm between Malar and Harsh as they walked very close to each other.

Malar laughed without saying anything. Harsh looked at her and said, "Share the joke with me too."

"Actually, it's not a joke but a thought about you. I just think, going by your fitness levels, you will be very active throughout the day, running here and there with full energy, unlike me, who has to sit throughout the office hours," Malar laughed again.

"Actually, you are wrong. I am active only during the workout sessions and extremely lazy during work. It's like my power saving mode," Harsh said with an expression. He crossed his right leg over his left, touched his thumb with his forefinger in both hands, and closed his eyes. It was a cliché pose of meditation, and Harsh used it to show his power-saving mode. Malar laughed loudly, looking at him.

"Talking about the office, I just remembered something," Malar said and pulled over her bag from her shoulders and took out a box from inside. She opened it and passed it to Harsh.

"Have this Kaju Katli. I got this in the office today," Malar said, looking into Harsh's eyes with a smile.

Harsh took one Kaju Katli and ate it. The sweetness melted inside his mouth, and Harsh thought that she had brought the Kaju Katli, especially for him.

"This is not good for your health. Eating one is fine but not the whole box," Harsh teased Malar, making a funny face.

"There is a special reason behind this Kaju Katli; that's why I wanted to share it with you," Malar said.

"So, what's the special reason?" Harsh asked. He felt excited to know the reason because his heart skipped a beat when Malar said, 'I wanted to share it with YOU.' That 'YOU' made his eyes shine.

"So there is this Mishra uncle who handles the pantry in my office. He is blessed with a baby girl today. So he distributed sweets to everyone. But the real magic lies in his story. He is 45 years old and was childless for the last 20 years of marriage. His family told him to marry someone else for kids, but he clearly refused and took a stand for his wife and love. In fact, he told me that he was with his wife not for having kids but for his love for her, and finally, after many medications last year she got pregnant and love won." Malar felt as if she had just ended giving an inspirational speech.

Harsh couldn't say anything. He felt his heart full. He just wanted love to win in everyone's story, but that was not possible, especially in his samaj, where only money won.

He realized Malar was waiting for a reply. He said, "That's such a great love story! I thank god that Mishra uncle is not from our samaj."

Malar couldn't understand what Harsh said. She didn't know anything about his samaj.

"I didn't get what you said."

"Nothing, just a random thought," Harsh tried to ignore it. He should have thought before saying it.

"No, tell me. What is it?" Malar asked. She was clueless as to why Harsh was behaving weirdly.

"It's really nothing. I will explain it to you some other day," Harsh said, trying to put an end to the conversation

"Ok," Malar felt bad. She was happy a few minutes back. She never liked it when someone closed themselves before her.

They kept walking silently for the next few minutes. Harsh realized that Malar felt bad about him not saying things, but he had his own fears to manage.

He tried to change the topic "Malar, I will WhatsApp you your diet by tomorrow morning."

"Hmm ok," Malar kept it short.

There was silence again. The silence on the road also helped. Malar checked the time on her phone and said

"I think it's time for us to leave. It's already 11."

"Yes, sure," Harsh said.

"Let's catch an auto. I will drop you first, and then I will go," Malar said.

"Okay," Harsh said, keeping things short and simple.

There was some kind of awkwardness between them which had developed in the last few minutes. But now Harsh had another problem to look forward to.

They stood on the side of the road, under a street light, and tried to stop an auto. But no auto stopped. Finally, after 10 minutes of persistence, a rickshaw agreed. But it was on the opposite side of the road.

"Aage se u-turn lekar aao yaha," Harsh shouted.

The u-turn was 100 meters ahead and was not in line with their destination, so the rickshaw disagreed and went away. Malar didn't know what was happening. She spoke in an enquiring voice.

"We could have easily crossed the road, Harsh. When you arrived today, you had an argument with the driver regarding the u-turn. Why are you acting so lazy." Harsh was silent. He had to explain this to Malar.

"Malar, I have Agoraphobia. It's called the fear of crossing roads. No matter how empty the roads are, I still feel anxious crossing them, whether it's night or day. I know it's rare. But it is what it is. I don't know why I have it. Neither of my parents know about it. That's why I always have my scooty with me. But today, my dad took it," Harsh said with a pinch of sadness in his voice.

This time Malar was lost for words.

"I am so sorry for judging you, Harsh. I shouldn't have called you lazy. I am really sorry." Malar realized how Harsh never judged her for her plump body, but she immediately declared him lazy just because he didn't cross the road. How wrong she was.

"It's okay, Malar. I am used to it. It's totally fine," Harsh said. He could see how much Malar was impacted by his words.

Both of them were silent. They wanted to reach out to each other physically or mentally, but both chose silence.

Suddenly a rickshaw stopped on the other side of the road. This time Malar didn't hold herself. She did what her mind and heart wanted. She wrapped her right hand over Harsh's left hand tightly as if she would never leave him. Their eyes met at the same time.

"Let's cross the road together," Malar said.

"I can't." Harsh's heart started to beat faster. Fear was holding him.

"You can. If you can inspire me to get fit, you can do this too. Just follow me and close your eyes." Malar had a sense of purpose to help Harsh. He did what she said.

Malar took the first step, and Harsh took the second. The bond between their hands became stronger and stronger, and they crossed the road in no time. Once inside the rickshaw, Harsh had tears in his eyes, but he didn't want to show it to Malar. In the darkness, they were still holding hands as if they never wanted to let each other go. Harsh thanked Malar, but she didn't reply. Instead, she just pressed his hand a little harder. She was trying to tell many things through her touch.

When Harsh got down outside his building, their hands finally separated. He looked into Malar's eyes and said, "I don't know how I will cross roads again when you will not be around to hold my hand." He didn't wait for her reply, but both knew what her answer would be.

That night was tough for both of them as they kept looking at their respective hands, trying to experience that touch again.

Chapter 22

It was 6 pm, and Sagar left his house to go to the terrace. Usually, on Sundays, he was free, and that day was also the same.

His last week went well after seeing that unknown mystery girl playing the dhol as if the universe depended on it. Since that day, Sagar knew he could find the same passion for life. During the week, he wrote all his internal questions and also about the girl who played the dhol in a diary.

Today he was happy as he had planned to meet Malar and Harsh in the evening at their own place. Their adda - their terrace.

Sagar reached the top floor, opened the lift door, and made his way towards the terrace. Earphones were plugged in his ears, and he was listening to the same song that he had heard a day before on the radio.

He himself didn't know why he was listening to that song or the film that the song belonged to. Just one line stayed with him—that same line repeated in the song when Sagar entered the terrace and saw someone.

“Chhookar mere manko kiya tune kya ishaara,
Badla yeh mausam lage pyaara jag saara,
Tu jo kahe jeevan bhar tere liye main gaoon,
Geet tere bolon pe likhta chala jaoon”

A girl was standing with her back turned towards him. He was stunned to see someone else on the terrace as normally, he and Malar were the only ones to visit it frequently.

Sagar removed his earphones and heard that girl's voice for the first time. He realized that her voice sounded different. She spoke in some South Indian language with someone on the phone, not aware that Sagar was watching her.

Her hair was tied in a bun, and she was wearing a black t-shirt with grey pajamas. Sagar was still standing on the same spot and didn't know what to do. He was awkward with new people.

His phone rang, it was Malar. He picked it up.

"Where are you?" Malar asked.

"I am already upstairs," Sagar said, and listening to his voice, this time, the girl turned around.

Malar hung up the call saying she would reach in five minutes, but Sagar kept watching the girl.

He was stunned, and his first thoughts were, "Is this moment straight out of a cliché Bollywood movie or just a mere coincidence?" The girl standing in front of him, staring at him, was the same Dhol girl who had unknowingly given hope to Sagar.

Sagar tried to act nonchalant. He realized that she looked at him and was still talking over the phone. She hung up the call saying, "Sheri chetta, bye." Sagar wondered what her words meant.

Sagar turned both his lips inwards and pushed them together. He did this whenever he didn't know what to say or do.

The South Indian language speaking girl was the first one to break the ice. "Hey, so do you also stay here?" She said, pointing her fingers downwards to indicate the building.

"Yes, actually," Sagar wondered why she had said, "you also"..?

"Oh, same here," the girl said with a tight smile.

"What?" Sagar was taken aback, and the way he said 'what' made the girl a little uncomfortable.

"Why do you look shocked?" the girl asked as she was clearly surprised.

"Nothing like that. I have never seen you here before. How did you come on the terrace because it's normally locked, and I have its key?" Sagar asked because he wanted to know more about her.

"Actually, we shifted here just two days back as tenants on the A-wing 403, and today I came up here and found the terrace open. By the way, the view from here is amazing. Especially the sunset. See," the girl said with a smile and pointed her finger towards the setting sun.

"Oh, yes. It's the same for us every day," Sagar tried to act cool for no reason. No one knew why he did or said such bizarre things at times.

"Yeah, but every day is not the same," she replied, looking at the sun. Her big eyes were sparkling.

Before Sagar could say anything, Malar and Harsh came together from behind, and Malar pushed him and said a very loud "Hello," she was clearly excited.

Before Sagar could understand what was happening, he lost his balance and tripped forward, falling directly on the South Indian girl who too lost her balance and fell down.

It was too late for Malar to realize that there was a fourth and new person on the terrace. By now, Sagar and the girl were lying inches close to each other. Sagar was the first one to get up slightly to check if she was ok. "I am extremely sorry. I didn't know. Are you ok..?" Sagar asked many things at the same time, sounding too nervous.

The girl also got up with her arms' help, and that was her first meeting with Sagar.

Sagar saw the black kajal under her eyes, and she observed Sagar's overgrown mustache hair coming up to his lips. Both felt that their observation of each other was cute. Their trance was broken when Malar and Harsh came to help them get up.

Sagar saw Malar and said, "What the fuck yaar! There has to be a limit to your masti."

Malar couldn't control her smile when Sagar said the above words, and with that, Sagar gave a half-smile. Harsh also wanted to laugh because the situation was unintentionally funny. But the question inside Harsh's and Malar's mind was, "Who was that girl with Sagar?"

Sagar answered their question, "By the way, she is the new member of our building, and before I could ask her name, Malar pushed me, and we both fell down. This is not how you welcome a new member." Sagar winked at Malar. She knew he was taking revenge for the push.

Malar looked at the girl, and smiling genuinely, she said, "I am extremely sorry. I didn't know you were here. Extremely sorry."

The girl smiled and replied, "It's totally ok. By the way, I am Sai," she extended her hand towards Malar.

"I am Malar, and welcome to our building Sai," She completed the handshake.

Malar continued, "And he is Sagar, and that is Harsh." Both Sagar and Harsh shook hands with Sai and greeted her.

Malar invited Sai to join them, and next, all four of them sat on their regular spot, and the next one hour went into sharing life talks and talking with each other.

Sagar and Malar told Sai how they had grown up together in the building and how the terrace had been a very special spot for them over the years. Harsh also shared how it was on this terrace that Sagar called him on a lazy Sunday, and since then, despite not being from the building, he was a part of the group.

Malar and Harsh looked at each other secretly and shared a smile when Harsh said that.

It was now Sai's turn to share things about herself. She was really happy about her new three friends being warm and welcoming. She shared with them that she hailed from Kochi, Kerala. After 12th, she had shifted to Bengaluru for her Hotel Management course. Her father was a government employee who dreamt of opening a cafe after his retirement near a beach in Kochi, and Sai's Hotel Management degree was the first step towards it. But during the three years course, many things changed. Having spent the first 17 years in a peaceful and green city like Kochi, Bangalore's pace took a toll on her. She started feeling unsatisfied all the time during those three years.

And she also noticed the same problem everywhere around her. Her roommates around her were in messy and abusive relationships. Their course was more about getting a job at a 5-star hotel than creating something special of their own.

Half of her time went into going to college from her room and coming back because of Bangalore traffic. During weekends all the cool and happening restaurants were filled up with corporate and college people.

Sai also tried following the new lifestyle and hated it instantly because, at the dinner table, people were less with each other and more with their mobile phone, trying to click photos of food and uploading them on Insta stories and Snapchat.

Sai started to doubt herself. She felt something was wrong with her because she didn't enjoy things that other people did. She felt something missing in everything she did or experienced. All these questions changed, and things started to look brighter when she decided to take a solo trip to Hampi.

"So, what are you doing currently?" Malar asked.

"After my Hotel Management course, I came to Mumbai for my master's in Tourism Management. I am in the final year now, and it's good. I will get to stay with my parents after a long time as my Achan got transferred to Mumbai."

Sai was happy. She was someone who judged people through their vibes, and the three new friends around her had cool and old-world vibes around them. It felt to her that they were not running with this world of time.

"Achan, as in?" Sagar asked, clearly getting confused with this new South Indian word.
"Achan means father in Malayalam," Sai informed him with a smile.

That evening went into random discussions about anything and everything. Sai was now a part of Terrace's core group, as Malar added her to their Whatsapp group. At that moment, the four of them didn't know what the future had in store for them because they were enjoying their present.

Chapter 23

A few days after the 4-friends-on-terrace encounter, Sai and her parents got settled in their new house. So, in the evening, Sai went for a stroll around Malad east, her new locality, to see things around.

After walking for around 15 minutes, she reached the Children's Academy School of Malad East. Outside the school gate, Sai saw a thin man on a cycle selling idlis and mendu vada. Many school students were eating idlis and vadas, licking the chutney and sambar from their fingers. Sai smiled, watching them. Among the school students, she saw a familiar face. There she saw Sagar eating idlis and licking the chutney. Their eyes met, and Sagar raised his right hand holding the idli, signaling Sai to cross the road and come to him.

Sai crossed the road and tried very hard to control her laughter when she saw the chutney stuck on the tip of Sagar's nose.

"Hey, what's up?" Sagar said with half an idli in hand and half inside his mouth.

Sai found it gross and made a face. She said, "First, finish eating it."

Sagar finished eating the idlis in the next two minutes and washed his hands with water, but the chatni on the nose was still there.

Sai laughed and said, "You have chutney on your nose."

"What where?" Sagar tried to clean his nose, but he missed the spot.

Finally, Sai took a paper from the idliwala uncle and cleaned the tip of Sagar's nose.

"That's the grossest way of eating Idlis."

"Yeah, it is gross, but you savor the real taste of chutney when you lick your fingers. Been doing it since long." Sagar was proud of his finger-licking skills.

"Stop it, Sagar." Sai tried to slap him on his back.

"By the way, this was my school." Sagar pointed to the massive building behind the idliwala and his cycle. He had been eating the idli since he was in the 5th standard.

"That's great," Sai said, looking at the vast school that took her back to her school memories in Kerala.

"So, where are you headed?" Sagar asked.
"Towards our building."
"I think we have the same destination. Let me join you," Sagar paid for the idlis and walked with Sai, side by side.

There was an awkward silence between them. Neither of them knew what to speak, especially Sagar. He wanted to keep the conversation going with Sai, so he asked the most cliché question ever.
"So what are your plans after masters? That day on the terrace, you said it's the last month of your masters before exams."
"My plans are pretty bizarre, to be honest. Do you really want to know them?" Sai had a sign of carelessness in her voice, which Sagar observed.
"I would love to know them now," Sagar said, and while walking, he realized he and Sai were of the same height.
"I want to start my travel company where I will organize tours to my favorite place in India, which is Hampi," Sai said with a sparkle in her eyes.
"That plan is not bizarre at all, but where is Hampi? I have never heard of it before," Sagar was honest with his reply.
"See, that's why I want to take everyone to Hampi. No one knows the magic of that place. You know I have an offer from a huge travel company to work with them. It organizes tours to Leh and Ladakh and all the cliché places, but I want people to experience Hampi," Sai explained with such passion as if she was about to crack a million-dollar deal.
"Then do it. You look so confident right now while explaining about Hampi. I am sure you will crack it," Sagar just said what he felt at that moment.
Sai was taken aback for a few moments. She looked at Sagar in his eyes and said, "You are the first person to say this to me. Before this, everyone told me that I am making a mistake by rejecting the offer of such a job, but they don't know how much Hampi means to me. So yeah, thanks."
"Actually, I have to thank you first," Sagar said and went on to tell Sai how he had seen her for the first time while she was playing dhol-tasha and how he was so motivated after watching her play the dhol with so much passion.
"What? Really! Why didn't you tell me before?" Sai was shocked.
"Sorry I didn't tell you because I was too shocked to see you in our building and felt too shy to tell you. But see, I also recorded the video of your performance." Sagar showed her the video he had recorded.

"I didn't know I had such a big fan," Sai winked at Sagar while watching the video.
"Haha, yeah! I really loved the way you played that dhol. Whenever you play it again, do tell me," Sagar said, looking straight into Sai's eyes.
"Actually, it was a practice session for my college fest, which happened last week itself. So let's see if I get the chance to play it again," Sai said.

They both were so engrossed in the conversation that they did not realize when they reached the building.
Before parting, Sai asked, "So what are you doing tonight?"
"Nothing special. Why?" Sagar replied.
"Actually, my parents are going for a night out at dad's colleague's place. So if you, Malar, and Harsh could join me, we could watch a good Malayalam movie?"
"Ok, let me ask Malar and Harsh. But do you really want to watch Malayalam movies? I have seen a few dubbed South Indian movies which air on Sony Max and feature action scenes which are beyond science and gravity."
"Don't judge a book by its cover. Malayalam movies are different from the movies produced in the rest of the South Indian industry. Watch it first and then judge," Sai defended Malayalam cinema with full gusto.
"Ok, ok, don't get offended! Let me ask Malar and Harsh, and then I will let you know," Sagar said, and they parted aways.
After two hours or so, Sagar called Sai.
"Hey! Malar and Harsh are at the gym and will not be able to join. So now tell me what to do?"
"Then why don't you come? Someone is better than no one." Sai laughed at her own joke.
"Are you sure?" Sagar had never been to a girl's house alone, so he was nervous.
"Yes, I am 100 percent sure. Join me soon," Sai said.
"Hey, but I don't understand Malayalam. How will I watch a movie?" Sagar had a valid point.
"Dude, there is a thing called 'subtitles' invented for people like you," Sai's sarcasm was on point.
"Haha. Ok ok! Coming in five." Sagar reached Sai's place precisely 10 mins later.

He rang the doorbell; Sai opened the door with a smile. "Hey! Welcome to my humble abode."

Sagar entered her house with a hint of nervousness. He didn't know how this plan was going to unfold. He saw Sai. She was wearing a grey t-shirt with black pajamas. She had left her black hair open, and she had a fresh vibe around her.

Looking at her comfort level, Sagar felt as if someone had given him a good strong coffee after a long tiring day.

"So what will you have? Coffee or tea?" Sai asked.

"No, formalities, please!" On the inside, Sagar felt good when she asked him for tea or coffee.

"I can't watch a movie without coffee, so I have already made it. Drink it, and please compliment me by saying that I make the best coffee," Sai's reply was on point.

"As you say, madam," Sagar was delighted.

Apart from his college stint with Priya, no other girl had been interested in him romantically and now sitting inside Sai's house, that too alone, was a big thing for him. He felt good and confident.

Sai went inside the kitchen, and meanwhile, Sagar observed her house. There was a big TV on the main furniture, and above it, there were many photo frames kept. In one photo, he saw the young Sai with her parents in a boathouse. Sagar assumed the location to be Kerala.

Sai was sitting on a giant boulder in one particular photo overlooking many such small boulders, coconut trees, and ancient temples. Sagar couldn't pinpoint the location.

Sai broke his attention when she brought two cups of hot coffee with banana chips.

"These chips are especially from Kerala, have them," Sai said.

Sagar took one and tried it. He had never eaten such crispy and delicious banana chips in his life.

"This is so good, Sai. Thanks," Sagar said while eating more chips.

"Your welcome. Whenever I miss Kerala, I eat them. They are my supporters in bad times," Sai sounded perfect to Sagar.

She settled down next to Sagar with a reasonable distance between them. Both took their coffee.

"So should we start the movie?" Sai asked.

"Yes, sure. I am excited." Sagar took the first sip of coffee, and it activated all the taste buds inside his mouth. It was dark and sweet at the same time. After the banana chips, the second best thing that he had tasted was the coffee.
"You really make the best coffee in the world, Sai," he said, looking in her eyes.
"I know. Thanks. Hahaha!" Sai smiled and laughed at the same time.
"From where did you learn it?" Sagar was curious.
"It's a long story. Save it for some other day. Let's start the movie first."
"Okay, by the way, what's the name of the movie?"
"I will tell you once the movie starts. Now sit tight and let me show you the magic of Malayalam cinema," Sai was ultra-confident.
And the movie began. During those three hours, Sai and Sagar saw "Premam" together.

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What happens when you love a person but don't have the guts to confess your feelings?

Harsh felt guilty as till that day he hadn't told Malar about his engagement with Khushboo. He knew he was in love with Malar but was there any other way to know it for sure? No. The only way was to tell her. But how? He didn't have answers for it.

Malar, on the other hand, was in love but confused. What if Harsh rejected her because she was less fit and older than him? She also had her fears that stemmed from how things had ended when she was in a relationship with Nimit.

They both still met every day at the gym. Harsh still helped her every day during the workout, and Malar still held Harsh's hand while crossing the road.

They were in a mental state where they wanted to hug each other tightly, but they both feared that they would break each other while hugging.

Harsh also feared telling his family if he and Malar ever came into a relationship. He couldn't even imagine what would happen if he broke his engagement with Khushboo. The whole samaj would start talking about it, and his family name would surely come in the bad books of his samaj.

That night after the gym, Malar and Harsh didn't speak about what they had to do with each other but kept talking about random things like food,

songs, and movies. Both knew that the other person had something important to share, but neither took the initiative to ask. The road on which they were walking seemed emptier that day.
Dark clouds were indeed looming around them.

Chapter 24

It was after a long time that Sagar and Malar were sitting on the terrace without Harsh and Sai. Though they both never thought that way, there was a sense of serenity when they were together and alone on the terrace.

It was Friday, and Sai had summoned Sagar, Malar, and Harsh to the terrace at 6:30 pm. Malar also had an off that day, so Sagar and Malar decided to meet a little bit early.

Sagar observed a change in Malar's appearance. She looked lean and fit. Her face was glowing, and the dark circles around her eyes were almost gone.

"How's your health? He asked. They both were walking across the terrace.

"I am doing really well. All thanks to you," Malar said, smiling.

"Why are you thanking me? What have I done?"

"Firstly, you accompanied me to visit Dr. Meera. Secondly, you introduced me to Harsh. Without him, I wouldn't have started exercising. Do you know that I lost 3kgs in the last one month?" Malar said with a shine in her eyes. She sounded genuinely grateful to Sagar.

Thanking people genuinely will never go out of fashion.

"I did whatever I could for you. I did it because I couldn't see you hopeless and tired. Thanks to you, you took charge of your life back," Sagar said.

"Hahahaha, okay! Enough of your pep talks. Tell me, how was the Malayalam movie you and Sai watched?" Malar asked, changing the topic.

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Malar, you will think I am exaggerating, but "Premam" was the best romance movie I have ever seen. It was so real and heart-touching that I wondered why the fuck I was into watching the shitty Bollywood movies," Sagar was very excited as he spoke about Premam.

"Oh, okay. Your animated reaction tells me that the movie was excellent. What was the story?" Malar asked.

"If I narrate the story, the fun would go away. It's the story of George, who falls in love three times. The movie starts when he is 16 years old and ends when he is 30, and it's his journey of love and life. Just watch it. It's pure magic," Sagar explained whatever he could without giving any spoilers.

"If you appreciate it so much, I will surely watch it soon," Malar said.

What Sagar didn't reveal to Malar was that after watching Premam, he was so impressed by Malayalam movies that he and Sai had watched more than 10 Malayalam movies together sitting on the terrace every evening around eight. Both of them shared earphones while doing so.

In between movies, Sai also told him how she wanted to start her travel company and take everyone to Hampi.

After every movie, Sagar would write about his experiences in his personal diary. After half an hour of Malar and Sagar walking around, Sai came, and after 10 minutes, Harsh joined them too. All four of them sat on the water tank. Sai took a moment and started speaking as if she was addressing a board meeting.

"First of all, thanks to all of you for making it on such short notice."

Sagar interrupted her. "Please don't be so business class," he laughed at his own joke.

Sai made an angry face at him.

"Ok, I am sorry. Please continue," Sagar somehow controlled his laughter.

"So guys, I want to start my travel company. And I want to show the world Hampi. Sagar knows this already, and now you two also know it. Now the question in your mind would be, why Hampi? That's because, during my graduation, I lied to my parents about going to Goa with my friends and instead went on a solo trip to Hampi. That changed me, and that's the reason I chose Tourism Management as my subject in masters. Now, why is Hampi so special? I can't explain it. You have to visit the place and experience it yourself."

"Now, let's come to the main point. You must be thinking why I called you guys. I want you all to come with me to Hampi for a trial trip before I start my company. I can't do this alone because real feedback is very important before I start my company officially. Everything will be arranged by me - hotel, food, sightseeing. We can share the expense between us and the next weekend would be good for the trip. So ya that's it,"

Sai said so many things in one go that she took a deep breath to slow herself down.

"I am in," Sagar was the first one to reply. He raised his hand while saying yes. Looking at him, Sai laughed, thinking it was a classroom where Sai was the teacher and Sagar, the obedient student.

Malar looked at Harsh first and then replied, "If everyone is ready, I don't have any problem." By looking at Harsh's facial expression, Malar could

tell that something was not right.
Harsh replied next, "I so want to come, but my parents have already made plans. We are going to Surat next weekend, and that too to a boring marriage of our samaj," Harsh spoke half the truth, and the other half was a story. In reality, Khushboo's family had invited his family for a two days stay at their place for family bonding and to fix the date of their engagement.
"We can shift the dates," Malar suggested because she couldn't imagine the trip without Harsh.
"That will also not work because I have a lot of meetings lined up after the upcoming weekend. Buyers are going to arrive from many places. So I can't skip work." This time Harsh was utterly right.

Malar's face fell flat after listening to Harsh. He saw her and realized he needed to do something because he might not get another opportunity to travel with Malar. She was the person whom he loved but couldn't express. And he had to forcefully meet a person whom he didn't even know properly. Trying to infuse some hope in Malar and keeping things positive, Harsh said, "Give me some time till tonight. I will see if I can change things."

After their meeting on the terrace, Sagar and Sai went to their respective houses. Malar went down to buy vegetables, and Harsh also joined her. They both didn't speak much, but while crossing the road, Malar caught Harsh's hand and said
"Please come. It will be fun."
By the time they reached the other side of the road, Harsh said
"I will try my level best."

***

Harsh's brain was running at its optimum level to think of a plan to manipulate his parents and Khushboo's family. He thought hard, and there it was. He got his idea and called Khushboo the next second. She picked it after a few rings.
"Hey, it's good to see your call during a weekday," Khushboo said with a pinch of sarcasm.
"Oh, yes. Actually, I wanted a favor from you," Harsh said in a hurry.
"Ok, so do you only call when you want something from me? Very smart!" Khushboo's words were on point.

"No, it's not like that. I seriously have something important." Harsh kept it straight and forward.
"Ok, ok, tell me, what is it?"
"So, as you know, our families have a meet-up plan for the coming weekend. The thing is that one of my closest school friends, Sagar, is going to America next month and our group has planned a two days vacation the next weekend itself because that's the time everyone is free. So…" Harsh said everything as planned inside his head.
"Ok, so do you want me to cancel the meet-up?" Khushboo said.
"No, cancelling the meet-up won't work. Because my parents will not let me go on vacation, which is scheduled for Goa. They will think that I would go to Goa and drink," Harsh was using his words very carefully.
"So, what should I do?" Khushboo asked.
"Let the families meet. See if you can somehow stay unavailable during the upcoming weekend. That way, my parents will not drag me along, and I can enjoy with my friends."
"So, you want me to lie to our parents?" Khushboo sounded stunned and angry.
"No, it's nothing like that. I am just asking for your help," Harsh was scared about his plan getting backfired.
"Wait, let me tell my dad that you are encouraging me to lie," Khushboo was more angry and furious by now.
"No, no, no! Please don't do that! You don't do anything; I will manage by myself," Harsh felt paralyzed by fear. He didn't expect this to happen.
"Haha. I am sorry. I was just playing a prank on you. Don't worry about anything. I will manage everything over here. Tell your parents that I will not be available, so they can allow you to go with your friends," Khushboo assured Harsh.
Harsh was furious by such a silly prank from Khushboo, but he controlled his emotions. "Thank you so much," he thanked her.
"Just one thing," Khushboo demanded.
"What?"
"After you come back from Goa, you have to come to Surat and meet me. We will go on a date."
"Sure," Harsh didn't think much about it because at that moment, all that mattered for him was to go to Hampi with Malar.

After the call with Khushboo, Harsh opened his Whatsapp. He clicked on the group named "Terrace Buddies," which was created by Sagar. He wrote
"Guys, I am in, and the plan is on! Cheers!"
Malar was the first one to reply, "Wow."
Sagar was next, "That's like my friend."
Sai wrote, "That's great. So next weekend it is to Hampi."
In the next instance, Malar messaged Harsh, "Thank you for coming."

Chapter 25

FOUR DAYS LATER ON A CONFERENCE CALL.
Sai was the first one to speak, "Guys, there is a problem. My initial plan was that we would go from Mumbai to Hampi via bus. But I just found out that all the buses to that route are full for the weekend and going by train was never a possibility. So there is only one option."
Sagar spoke even before Sai completed, "Which is?"
Sai replied, "We have to go by car. Whose car that would be, I don't know because hiring a cab would cost us a bomb."
Malar knew whose car it would be, so she directly jumped to the point, "Sagar, please, I don't want this trip to end."
Harsh understood and joined the party, "Come on, Sagar, you can do this."
Sai said, "Sagar, do you have a car?"
Sagar finally replied, "Yes, I have an Ertiga, but I don't know how to drive. My dad uses it most of the time."
"Then how did you get your driving license?" Malar asked.
"I bribed the policeman who was taking my test. In reality, I have never driven a car."
"I can drive," Harsh said. His chance of becoming a hero was here. He was already imagining Malar sitting next to him while driving.

"Harsh, it's 750 km from Mumbai. Are you sure you can drive?" Sai needed to be sure.
"I am sure. I have driven till Gujarat before, so I can manage." Harsh was determined to drive.
"Sagar, please say yes," Malar knew Sagar so well that she knew what Sagar's next word would be.
"Ok then, I am in." Sager really wanted to go on that trip, and then he started to think of ways to convince his parents to let him take the car.
The three of them shouted and cheered loudly. They knew it was happening in reality.
Sai instructed, "So guys, we have to leave by 5 am tomorrow morning. Sleep early, pack your bags with cool clothes, and get ready to be kissed by Hampi."

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That night Harsh went to speak to his dad. "Papa, I just spoke to Khushboo. She will not be available on Saturday and Sunday. I don't know, but she has some work. So I am thinking about going to Lonavala with my friends for three days."
"What? Where is she going?" Harsh's father was surprised to listen to this piece of information.
"I don't know. She told me that she would not be available during the time the outing is planned," Harsh said, trying to cover up for her.
Harsh's father took out his mobile and tried calling Khushboo's father. Harsh stopped him.
"Papa, we don't have any right to ask Khushboo's father about her whereabouts before marriage. It would look like we are controlling. Rich and big families don't like it." Harsh knew his father's weakness was the rich and big family tag, and he was using it for his benefits. Harsh himself was surprised by his acting skills.
Harsh's father understood what his son was trying to explain. He didn't make any call but asked Harsh.
"Why are you not coming with us?" Harsh saw this coming, but he was ready.
"Papa, Khushboo clearly told me that it was up to me whether I wanted to join the family meeting. There might be some reason, so it's better you and mummy go. I will enjoy with my friends."

Harsh's father found things to be really fishy, but he didn't probe further. He just accepted what Harsh said.
At that moment, Harsh took a deep breath and messaged Malar,
"See you tomorrow, good night."

Chapter 26

FRIDAY MORNING, 5 am.
Everyone was ready. In life, once, everyone gets an opportunity to change. This trip was their opportunity. For Malar, it was a trip to discover love. For Harsh, it was a trip to face the truth and stand up for it. For Sai, it was a trip to do something which mattered the most to her, and for Sagar, it was a trip to find a voice.
The boys hopped inside the car. Harsh sat on the driving seat, and Malar sat next to him. Sagar and Sai were sitting on the back seat. Harsh started the ignition, but Sai interrupted him, "One minute."
She continued, "Sagar, can you get down for a minute? Walk a little forward and cross us as the car moves forward."
"What? Why?" Sagar was shocked as to why Sai was telling him to do such weird stuff.
"I will explain everything to you. For now, please do it," Sai requested.
Taking a deep breath, Sagar said, "Ok," and got down from the car. He walked a little forward and turned himself towards the car. Harsh pressed the accelerator, and the car moved. Sagar crossed the car's path. Sai rolled down the window and said, "Thanks. Now you can get in."
Sagar sat back next to Sai, and here their trip began for Hampi.
It was 7 am when they took their first halt for some tea and hot and spicy misal pav. Harsh and Malar went to order food as it was a self-service restaurant. Sagar and Sai were together. The sun was rising slowly. Sagar asked,
"Why did you make me do that strange thing?"
"Oh, that! It's a weird thing my parents do. Whenever we go out for a trip or any important work, my parents make me do the same thing. They believe I

am their lucky charm. So me crossing their path will bring luck and goodness to them. For me, you have been a lucky charm. Since the time you fell on me on the terrace, many good things started happening. So I made you do that, please don't laugh now," Sai explained, smiling.
"What? You think I am lucky for you?" Sagar smiled and felt something inside. It was for the first time a girl had called him lucky.
"I think that's what I meant," Sai smiled this time.
"Thanks," Sagar was surely overwhelmed.
Both Sai and Sagar had their moment, and after some time, they resumed their journey. Just before they could enter Pune, Google Maps showed two ways. First, via Solapur and second, via Hubli. The second route was 30 minutes faster, so they decided to move via that route.
After Pune, Malar and Sagar shifted places. She went to sit at the back, and Sagar sat next to Harsh.
Sai took up the responsibility of playing the songs. The first song she played was Patakha Guddi from Highway. This led to a discussion between the four of them about how every movie of Imtiaz Ali was connected to travel and Sufism.
The second song was "Tum Jab Paas aati ho" by Prateek Kuhad. No one apart from Sai knew about the singer, but all of them were touched by his voice. Sai told them that Prateek Kuhad was an independent artist, but his songs were a big hit on the internet. Then she went on to play all his famous songs like Dil Beperwah, Tune Kaha, and Yeh Pal.
Sagar felt his voice had an unexplained calmness, and he loved a particular line from Dil Beparwah:
"Iss dil ki aadat yahi hai,
Gir kar sambhalta nahi hai,
Zaalim samajhta nahi hai,
Yeh koi zubaan."
Another line from Yeh Pal
"Labon pe jo bhi ho,
Keh bhi do thehera hoon main,
Yeh Dil ki baato ko
Rok na thahera hoon main."
The lyrics resonated with Malar. She wanted to say a few things to Harsh, and the same was the situation of Harsh.

Sai then changed tracks from Hindi to Malayalam. The first one was "Malare" from Premam. Despite not understanding the language, Harsh felt the song. He immediately knew the singer was speaking about love. He saw Malar for a second through the rearview mirror.
After listening to the Malare song, Sagar shared with everyone how much he had loved the movie Premam and how much he had felt connected to the protagonist of the film - George. Sai smiled while listening to Sagar's words.
They kept listening to songs and talking about anything that came to their mind. The road felt good, and by 12 pm, they stopped for lunch after crossing Kolhapur.
At around 5 pm, they reached Hubli, and now Hampi was 160kms far. Till now, the ride was smooth and fun, but Sai made a big mistake by trusting Google Maps blindly. Google Maps behaved like a toxic, misogynistic boyfriend and led the four on a wrong shortcut to Hubli, which was not meant for a big car. They somehow found their way out by asking the locals, but it took them 30 minutes to reach the main highway because of the bad roads.
Since then, the journey to Hampi was all trouble and went a total downhill. By 6 pm, the sun had set, and the sky started to turn dark very fast. The worst part was that there were no lights on the road, and the road was full of potholes and speed breakers. The cherry on the cake was the highway, a single lane road, so vehicles came from the opposite side.
Harsh asked Sai, "Why is the road so bad?"
Sai didn't know what to say. "The thing is that this is my first time on this route."
"What? Are you watching this? Since the last 30 minutes, I have been driving at the speed of 20. There is no light on the road, and there are so many potholes on top of that. How will we cross the next 100 km?" Harsh was angry for the first time. He was tired of driving since morning, and now his head was blasting because of the beamer lights which the vehicles on the opposite side were flashing.
"I am sorry, guys. I didn't know the roads would turn out to be like this because from Bangalore to Hampi, the roads are pretty good," Sai was sad because the first step of her dream trip was turning out to be a nightmare. She was cursing herself for not planning things better. Now everyone was suffering because of her.

"Guys, what if our tyre gets punctured because of these potholes? There is no spare tyre in the car, and in this darkness, we will not find a mechanic." Sagar was adding more fuel to the fire. He himself really didn't know why he was speaking such negative things in the middle of such a troublesome situation.

"Sagar, stop speaking such shit, and Harsh, don't worry, take a halt at the next petrol station. There, people will surely know about the road situation further. And Sai, it's not your fault. It's just 100kms calm down" Malar took charge now. Panic was the last thing they wanted.

The manager at the petrol pump station informed them that the roads were bad till the next town. Afterward, it was manageable. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief listening to that. The manager also said that the Solapur route had better roads than that route. Sai took notice of it. It was her first learning as a travel manager. They resumed their journey soon and reached Hospet at sharp 8 pm.

Chapter 27

The hotel’s name was Malligi, and the place turned out to be really refreshing for everyone. Two female receptionists who were wearing South Indian Silk Kanjivaram sarees welcomed them with a warm smile. Their registration was done, and then they were served with hot filter coffee. The sip of the hot welcome drink took away the fatigue of the four. The coffee had something special, which was unexplained.

Everyone stood in a circle in the hotel lobby because Sai had to make an announcement.

“Guys, we have successfully completed the first part of our journey. So let’s clap together,” the other three looked at each other and smiled, clapping. Sai continued, “Now, let’s clap for Harsh, who drove us very safely. He is the reason we are standing here in Hospet, and I am sorry I didn’t research enough about the roads.” Everyone clapped again, but Malar’s claps were the loudest. Harsh observed that and smiled.

“So, let’s call it a day and order dinner inside the room itself. Malar and I will order. You guys join us.” Sai ended her speech, and soon the boys and girls reached their respective rooms.

The four of them got settled in their rooms.

In the next hour, everyone freshened up and met inside the girls’ room for dinner. They all were in a state where their stomachs were growling with hunger, and the mere thought of food made them drool.

They had ordered pizza, hakka noodles, dal tadka, and rice. But the hotel staff had served only three plates, and Harsh was left with none. Sagar said, “Wait, let me call and ask for another plate.”

Malar stopped him.

“It’s fine. Harsh and I can eat together. I mean, we can share from the same plate because, by the time the plate comes, the food will turn cold. So, it’s fine.”

Sagar just said, “Okay.”

Harsh got up and sat next to Malar to eat together, and they all started having their dinner. The atmosphere of the room was lightened up by their laughs and jokes.

Sagar was watching Harsh and Malar closely, and then he also signaled Sai to watch them. Sai and Sagar both realized the same thing.

The dinner got over soon, but they sat on the bed and kept talking till 11 pm. Finally, Sai suggested all of them to sleep because the next day was going to be a long one.

The boys departed to their room. Just then, Sai received a message from Sagar. It read, “Hey, try asking Malar about what’s going on in her love life? It has been a long time since I asked her the question. ☺ ☺ ”
Sai laughed and replied, “I suggest that you ask the same question to your roommate. Good night.”

In both the rooms, the girls and boys were unable to sleep. Some important discussion was going on.
Sagar indirectly asked Harsh when he was busy chatting with Malar on his mobile phone.
“So bhai, when are you getting married?” Harsh’s heart started to pound faster when he heard the topic of marriage coming up.
“Oh shit! Does Sagar know about my engagement?”
“No. That’s not possible. He must be asking randomly,” Harsh said to himself and then replied to Sagar, who was sleeping next to him and reading a novel by Ashwin Sanghi.
“I don’t know. Dad keeps forcing me, but I don’t like anyone from my samaj.”

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In the girls’ room, Sai and Malar shared the bed and talked about their school days and college life. Sai observed Malar blushing while messaging someone. She changed the topic and asked Malar.
“So girl, What about your personal life? Have you ever been in a relationship?” The word relation took Malar back to the time she spent with Nimit. It was good and bad at the same time.
She replied, “Yes, I was in a relationship for a long time, but things didn’t work out, so we parted off. You tell me what about you?”
“I have never been in a serious relationship ever. What’s the current situation? Do you like someone?” Sai asked.
During the same time, Sagar asked a similar question to Harsh, “Okay, but do you like someone from outside your samaj?”

Both Malar and Harsh took a few seconds to think. First, they mentally accepted that they were in love and then said the same words to Sai and Sagar.
“Yes, I love someone.”
The next question from Sai and Sagar was also the same “So who is that special one?”
In that next second, when the world took a pause,
Malar replied, “Harsh.”
Harsh replied, “Malar.”
No one slept that night. Instead, Sai and Sagar heard Malar’s and Harsh’s love story.

Then came the important question which Sai and Sagar asked at the same time.
“Have you shared your feelings with Harsh?”
“Does Malar know about your feelings?”
The common answer from both Malar and Harsh was "no".

Around 3:30 am, the four decided to sleep, but just before that, Sai texted Sagar.
“Your best friend loves your best friend.”
Sagar smiled and replied, “Yes, I just came to know that,” he continued typing, “But they have not yet shared their feelings with each other. Tomorrow, let’s do something about this. Good night.”
Sai texted back, “Okay, Good night.”

Chapter 28

The next morning in Hospet at hotel Malligi was very refreshing for the four. Malar and Sai were the first ones to wake up at around 8 am. They freshened up, and next, they went to wake up the boys. Sai rang their doorbell. Malar was with her.

Harsh got up. He was not wearing a t-shirt when he opened the door. Sai was surprised to see Harsh's well-toned body and his six-packs. She was short of words for a moment. Instead, Malar spoke with a smile.
"We are going for breakfast. You guys come fast."

Harsh was still rubbing his eyes. He smiled, looking at Malar, and said, "Okay, we will come in 10 minutes."

10 minutes later, the four were sitting inside the hotel restaurant overlooking the swimming pool. There was a breakfast buffet scheduled, and all the people present there were enjoying the food. After all, good food brings happiness.

Sai opted for a cheese omelet and some watermelons with hot coffee. Malar and Harsh had hot Idlis and Dosas, which was the specialty of that hotel. Sagar was in a different zone altogether. He opted for cupcakes and chocolate doughnuts.

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After breakfast, Sai explained the next part of the plan in the hotel lobby, which was full of tourists checking out and new guests checking in. The fragrance of Jasmine flowers filled the hotel's atmosphere with tranquility.
Sai said, "Our cab will arrive in the next 30 to 40 minutes. It will take us to Hampi, which is 20 km far from our hotel. So get ready, guys, and wear loose and comfortable clothes."
Sai and Malar went to their room. Harsh went alone, as Sagar told him that he had to make a call.
Sagar dialed Sai's number. She picked it up instantly.
"Is Malar around?" Sagar asked.
"No, she is taking a bath," Sai replied.
"So, did she say anything further?"

“No, she just said that she didn’t know what Harsh would think of her if she proposed to him.”
“Harsh also said something similar.”
“Okay, let’s do one thing today. We will try to keep them together as much as possible, and we both will mind our business. The close proximity between them will surely help.”
“Okay, done,” Sai replied.
Sagar hung up the call and ran to take a bath.

The cab arrived, and the four of them were ready. Sai sat next to the driver, and the others sat on the backseat. Malar and Harsh were seated next to each other.

Sai asked the driver’s name. He appeared to be in his 30s.
“My name is C.Ramachandran. You can call me Ram.” The driver informed them warmly.
Sagar asked a cliché question, “Do you understand Hindi, sir?”
Mr. Ram laughed. “I can’t speak clearly, but I understand what you all speak.” Everyone laughed. Sai asked him to start the car, and their trip began.

They went past the roads of Hospet town. The South Indian houses, people, bullock carts, and temples were new for Sagar, Malar, and Harsh. This is what a unique place does to you.

Curiosity takes birth, and your eyes start to explore simple things that don’t matter in a city like Mumbai. Harsh saw a coffee shop on the other side of the road. The guy was brewing piping hot coffee and found it fascinating. He turned towards Malar. He saw her eyes, which appeared like a painting to him, when she applied kajal. He saw that she was wearing a white tee with comfortable blue denim. Sitting next to her, he thought that she would never stop fascinating him.

By now, they were out of Hospet, and Malar was observing the far stretched and never-ending paddy fields filled with fresh green paddy. She felt alive watching it. She turned to look at Harsh and realized that he had been looking at her.

They were nearing Hampi, and Sagar was the first to spot it on both sides of the road.
“Sai, the stones here are so big! They are all in such different shapes! I have never seen anything like this before,” Sai smiled, realizing that finally, she could be the travel guide she always wanted to be.

“Yeah. Hampi is full of them, and they are called boulders. They are here in all shapes and sizes. Big, small, and there are both scientific and mythological reasons behind why they are here in Hampi,” Sai explained. Everyone nodded, understanding the bits of information regarding Hampi.

They took their first stop near the Tungabhadra River at Hampi. All four of them got out of the car.

Sai took charge. “So guys, we are officially inside Hampi now. The first thing we will enjoy is the coracle boat ride but before that, let me tell you a little history of this legendary place.” Sagar, Malar, and Harsh listened in rapt attention.

Sai continued to describe the place with utmost zeal.

“Hampi currently is a UNESCO world heritage site. Its history goes back to the Ramayana period. It was known as 'Kishkinda', and the proof that it belonged to the Ramayana period is that we have the birthplace of Lord Hanuman here in Hampi. During the 14th century, Hampi became the center of the Vijayanagar Empire. People from different parts of the world described Hampi as the wealthiest city full of palaces, temples, and massive monuments. And what you see now are the ruins of all those palaces, temples, and monuments. I think that’s what time does. Let’s start our boat ride then.”

They all walked towards the Tungabhadra river. The river flowed as if time had stopped. On both sides of the river, there were huge boulders and temple ruins. It was the perfect setup for a mythological comic. Malar took out her phone and started clicking pictures of the things that she found fascinating. She even told Harsh to stand under a huge boulder and clicked his picture.

Sagar was with Sai. That day, she wore a blue kurti with black leggings. On her forehead was a small bindi. Sagar found her to be very beautiful, especially when he saw her overlooking the clean blue river.

They reached the river where different coracle boats were lined up. They were all round in shape and very light in weight. Sai negotiated with one of the boys for the charge to be 1000 bucks for four people. The boy agreed. His name was Swami, and he smiled, realizing that he had gotten the first big deal of the day.

They all sat inside the coracle boat. Malar and Harsh sat next to each other, and both felt each other’s touch. Sagar, on the other hand, gave his

phone to Sai to click his pictures. Sagar was wearing a hoodie, camouflaged cap, and grey denim. Sai found him cute when she clicked his pictures.

Swami started to sail the round light-weighed boat with the help of wooden oars. Within a few minutes, they all started to feel as if everything had stopped. It was because of the calm and stable Tungabhadra River.

The boat was moving, but they didn't feel it was moving. The effect of the cool wind blowing with the calm river was such that that moment seemed to be the only thing that mattered to them. Harsh closed his eyes. After a long time, he was on vacation, and he felt free of mental clutters. Malar kept watching him and clicked his pictures.

15 minutes passed, and Swami broke the silence between the four.

"So now we will pass under a huge boulder. So when we are near the boulder, please bend properly." Everyone nodded in unison.

Swami sailed the boat slowly near the huge boulder which kissed the river. Everyone adjusted and bent themselves as Swami passed the coracle under the huge magnificent boulder. It was dark and cool there, and in that moment, Malar held Harsh's hand tightly for balance.

Swami took out his phone, switched on the flashlight, and pointed towards something. "Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing towards something.

The four of them saw a nest made on the edge of the boulder. Inside the nest, there was a newly born Koyal bird with its mother feeding it. The moment was surreal, and everyone's heart melted, looking at the baby bird. Harsh's grasp on Malar's hand became more intimate.

Sagar realized the delicate and tender nature of our universe. Sai was at a loss of thoughts and words. Sagar gave his phone to Swami to click the picture of the bird and the nest. While going back towards the riverbank, everyone was quiet.

The magic of Hampi had finally kicked in.

Chapter 29

Travel should slow us down, and that's what Hampi was doing. There was no urgency amongst the four of them. They were exploring everything not

just through their senses but also with their soul. After the coracle ride, the four took a stop to drink sugarcane juice and fresh coconut water. Sai tried to make the journey as organic as possible. The sugarcane juice glass was so big that Sagar and Sai had to share from one. Harsh and Malar were doing a clichéd thing for the first time; they were sharing coconut water through separate straws. Malar also clicked a selfie.

Just opposite the juice stall, there was the way towards the Narasimha shrine. The four of them went there and clicked lots of pictures with the huge monolithic sculpture of Lakshmi Narasimha. It had a very Indonesian feel to it.

Next, Sai took them to the Elephants stable and Lotus Mahal. While discovering the place, Sai also explained the history and importance of the particular location. Sai said a line that made everyone realize how much Hampi meant to her.

She said, "Each and every structure you guys see around, broken or not, has a history of 1000 years behind it. Just imagine how this kingdom must have looked. And I have heard that the kingdom of Mahishmati in the epic movie Bahubali was also inspired from this very place."

The exploration of the ruins of Hampi went on up till 1 pm in the afternoon. It was lunchtime, and Sai took them to the very famous Mango Tree restaurant in the Hampi market situated next to the Virupaksha Temple. The restaurant had a hippie and laid back vibe about it. All the people from different parts of the world were sitting inside the restaurant. They didn't want to reach anywhere. They were happy with where they were. There were also travel quotes written in different parts of the restaurant.

The four occupied a table in the corner. There were mattresses on both sides of the table; Malar and Sagar sat on one side and Sai and Harsh on the other.

All four of them first ordered Hot chocolate because Sagar made them order it. On the food front, Sai and Malar ordered a South Indian Thali. Harsh ordered a Sandwich, and Sagar ordered a Pizza with extra cheese. The time was good, the mood brilliant, and the food delicious.

Suddenly a song started playing in the background. It was "A Thousand Years" by Christina Perry. Sai spoke, "You know guys; this song was once my favorite. I still know its lyrics by heart." Saying this, she started singing in her smooth voice, which Sagar found to be very cute.

"I have died every day waiting for you,

Darling, don't be afraid, I have loved you for a thousand years,
I will love you for a thousand more."
Sai continued,
"And all along I believed I would find you,
Time has brought your heart to me; I have loved you for a thousand years,
I will love you for a thousand more."
Listening to these lines from the song, Harsh and Malar looked at each other. The fire in them was ignited.
By 3 pm, the four were inside the world-famous Vitthala Temple. The first thing they saw was the huge stone chariot. Sai explained to them the history behind the Temple and stone chariot. She also told them that there was a photo of the stone chariot on the backside of the new Rs. 50 note.
Malar told Harsh to stand near the chariot. She clicked his photo. Sagar and Sai also took a selfie. After that, Malar and Harsh were not interested in history. They just went together and sat inside the Kalyana Mandapa situated next to the stone chariot.
The floor of the Kalyana Mandapa was very cool and charming. Both Harsh and Malar had so much to say, but they both opted for silence. A cool wind kissed both of them, and that led to them holding each other's hands.
Sai, on the other hand, took Sagar to the Musical Pillars. She told him how different pillars, when banged, resonated with the sounds of different musical instruments. Sagar was fascinated by it.
More than 20 minutes passed. Harsh left Malar's hand and asked her to walk around with him. Malar obeyed him.
They both walked around the Vitthala Temple as if they were the last two people in the world. No one mattered to them. All the huge monuments, temples, and boulders looked small compared to what they had between them.
Now they were under a huge tree. Harsh saw a white flower on the ground. He silently picked it up and gave it to Malar. Again, no words were exchanged. They both then looked towards the tree, it had no leaves, and only white flowers grew on it.
Sai and Sagar came from behind and shouted, "Statue you both!"
Sai said, "This tree is 300 hundred years old. Just imagine how selfless our nature is. Withstanding 300 years and giving only flowers."
Sagar added, "That's a brilliant way to look at it."
Sai looked at Sagar and smiled.

She then clicked a picture of Harsh and Malar standing under the 300 years old tree. At that moment, Malar and Harsh had a storm of thoughts inside their brain, thoughts that they did not share with each other.
The four went to the final stop of the day at around 4:30 pm. It was the sunset point at the very beautiful Malayavanthan Parvata. As they were going up, Sai said
"This place is mythologically significant. It is said that Lord Ram and Lord Laxman stayed here during the rainy season on their way to Lanka."
Sagar said, "Woah! How do you know all this?"
Sai laughed. "Hahaha, of course through Google and also through some local research."
Malar and Harsh were behind them, coming up slowly.
Sagar went closer to Sai and whispered in her ear, "When we reach the top, let's sit a little far from these two. They need some time and space together."
Sai looked back to see Malar and Harsh. To her, they both looked like a single force. She said, "Done, and I pray that they say what they want, to each other"
In the next 10 minutes, they were on top of the Malyavanta Hill. There were very few tourists around, and there were many monkeys playing with each other. There was a small temple near the spot.
Malar and Harsh felt tranquility up there, and that's when they heard their inner voice. They decided to sit behind a huge boulder overlooking the magic of Hampi - the paddy fields, coconut trees, and many boulders in different forms and sizes. It looked as if nature had specially taken out time to make the scenery.
Malar and Harsh looked at nothingness because they were talking inside their head.
"Come on, Malar, say it."
"Come on, Harsh, do it. This is what it is."
Malar was the one to win. She said, "Harsh, I want to tell you something."
Harsh began to say, "I....."
Malar stopped him. "Please let me finish. Can I hold your hand while saying it?"
Harsh extended his hand. Malar held it with her hand and continued, "Harsh first of all, thank you for coming into my life. You have been like the sun in my life when there was only darkness. And today, after spending the whole day with you, I can't imagine how meaningless my life would be without

you. So, coming to the point, Harsh, I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you."
The grasp of their hands became tighter.
Harsh had never even in his wildest dreams imagined Malar proposing to him. He never thought that a girl would ever propose to him. He looked at the sun, which was not clearly visible because of the clouds that surrounded it.
His heart was beating very fast. He knew what to say, but the image of his father, mother, and Khushboo appeared in front of his eyes as if trying to warn him. But love overtook everything.
Harsh said, "Can I kiss you?"
Malar smiled, bent forward while still holding hands with Harsh, and kissed him. They both closed their eyes as their lips united. No one apart from the sun saw them kissing and becoming one.
That one moment was the beginning, middle, and end of everything. The universe itself got recreated while Malar and Harsh continued their kissing. On the other hand, the sun became so happy looking at Harsh and Malar that it colored the sky dark orange with its light.
The kiss ended. Harsh and Malar opened their eyes and saw their universe in each others' eyes. Harsh kept his head on Malar's shoulder, and they both bid farewell to the sun.
After a few minutes, Malar whispered in Harsh's ear, "Let's go to our hotel room. I want to sleep in your arms, Harsh."
Harsh looked into her eyes and said, "Let's go."
They both got up, took a selfie, and then went towards Sai and Sagar to inform them.
Malar said, "We both are going to the hotel."
Sagar understood the situation. "Okay, you both take care. We both will get a little late."
Malar said, "Okay, done. See you then."
After Harsh and Malar went away, Sai and Sagar hi-fived each other because they knew that love had blossomed finally.
The sky and Hampi had turned dark blue with a tinge of orange. The sun had sat down sometime back. Malar and Harsh were sitting on the car's back seat holding hands and were very close to each other. There was no space for anything between them. The windows were rolled down, and the cool breeze was blessing the couple and their love. Because of the breeze,

Malar's hair was all over Harsh's face. He closed his eyes and didn't let Malar tuck her hair behind her ears.
Malar and Harsh got out of the car once they reached the hotel. They again held each others' hands and moved towards Malar's room. In the hotel lobby, the fresh fragrance of the incense sticks welcomed them. Once inside the room, they both hugged as if two worlds were becoming one. They were pulling each other close so tightly as if no force in the universe could separate them and their oneness. During the start of the hug, there was an urgency between them, but after three minutes, they settled down, and the hug felt more like a meditation.
Malar slowly whispered in Harsh's ear. "Thank you for everything. From exercising at the gym to helping me accept my body as it is, you can't even imagine what an impact you have had in my life. I love you, Harsh, and no matter how clichéd it sounds, I want to shout and tell the whole world about it."
Harsh broke the hug; his eyes were wet. Malar wiped his eyes with her hand.
"Why are you crying?" Malar asked in a tender voice.
Harsh took Malar's hand, and they both sat on the bed. He said
"I should be the one saying thank you because before I met you, I was non-existential. I was no one. I used to like someone, and that person got married to someone else just because his family had more money than mine. I used to work out just to impress people, but nothing worked because I didn't have the self-worth. But then you came. Thanks to Sagar and everything changed. Malar, it's because of you that I realized that even I am capable of helping someone. You gave me purpose and self-worth. I love you, Malar, and I want you to hold my hands while crossing all the roads of life."
By now, both of them were in tears. When two people in love say everything, they want to tell each other, then the journey of becoming one starts.
The randomness of this universe brought together two people who never imagined being together.
Malar went near Harsh. Her eyes were looking into his eyes as if stars were staring at each other. She said, "I will never let go of your hand. Just let the grip be tight."

And then she kissed him. Their lips met like the morning sun rays meets plants, like the rain meets soil, like a book meets its true reader.
Through their lips, they started unraveling each other. They started removing each others' clothes. Harsh kissed Malar and all her stretch marks, dark patches, and breasts, making her feel like the most beautiful girl on this planet.
Malar kissed Harsh all over, making him feel that he was worth it. He was her love. Then like a chef who makes his favorite dish with lots of passion, care, tenderness, and warmth, Malar, and Harsh made love. They were soft and tender. It felt as if the universe was in the creating process again. After making love, Malar and Harsh slept holding each other. They had never felt safer than while holding each other. They knew no one could harm their little tiny universe if they kept holding each other close and tight. But who knew what this world had in store for them?

Chapter 30

Sai and Sagar got down from the Malayavantha Parvat after the sun had set entirely, and the sky was completely dark. It was around seven in the evening. Sai spoke, and Sagar listened. She told him about Hampi, her previous experiences of visiting Hampi, the people from across the world whom she had met in Hampi, and their stories. Sagar saw her eyes and realized how a place could change a person and make her fall for it. Sai was in intense love with Hampi, and she wanted others to fall in love with it. That's how true love is; it spreads. They experienced the sunset listening to songs that were specially curated for this trip.
Some of the list's songs were "Kahin to Hogi Vo" from Jaane tu ya Jaane na and "Maahi Ve" from Highway. They also clicked many photos of each other and a few selfies.
When they both got down, it was utterly dark around. Their cab was not there.
Sagar asked, "So now, where should we go?"
Sai looked at him. "Do you want to grab some coffee because I am craving it?

Sagar looked around. "Yes, but how will we commute? There is nothing around here."
"Sagar, tell me how people traveled from one place to another when transport hadn't been invented?"
Sagar thought it to be a silly question. He pondered over the answer, "I think through horses and bullock cart."
Sai started laughing very loudly, listening to Sagar's answer. While laughing, she said, "Arre Dumbo! People walked from one place to another."
Sagar acted smart and replied, "Oh, acha! You asked in that sense."
Sai was still laughing. "Come on now! Let's walk."
They started walking on the deserted road, which was surrounded by trees and huge boulders.
Sai initiated the conversation again. "So you are the reason Harsh and Malar met, and the rest is history."
"Haha, to be honest, Sai, I never in my wildest dreams thought that two of my best friends would fall for each other. I just introduced Harsh to Malar because she needed some fitness help, and Harsh was the best option. I really didn't know when all this happened. I am happy for them, but it's just that Malar never hides anything from me, so this fact came as a shock to me." Sagar shared what he felt with Sai.
Sai kept her hand on Sagar's back as if she was patting him. She said, "Hey, that's fine. Friendship is all about unsaid things which friends ultimately understand."
"Yes, you are right. I am just worried about one thing," Sagar said.
"What?"
"Sai, if they both are serious and thinking about marriage, then Harsh's side of the family is not good. They won't allow an inter-caste marriage. Harsh told me all this way back," Sagar expressed his concerns. He knew Malar had been through enough, and now this religion angle would make things more complicated for both of them.
"Hmmm, don't worry. Things will be fine. They both are mature enough, and we are also there to help them. You just enjoy your trip," Sai assured Sagar with her energetic energy and voice.
Sagar asked this time, "Do you like to record your trip? I mean by writing in a diary or on your phone?"

"Ummm, I record it in my phone when I feel that something is very special; otherwise, everything is inside my head and heart," Sai said genuinely.
"That's good. I actually like to write in my diary. I know it's the most clichéd thing to do, but I love to write about the experiences I have, and it can be a good story for a novel," Sagar shared his interest.
"That's cool. Do you also like to read?" Sai asked. She appreciated people who loved art.
"I love to read books. I have more than 400 books in my house. What about you?" Sagar was now excited because his favorite topic was being discussed
"Same as you. I love books, but the irony is that it has been months that I read one apart from my textbooks."
They both had a topic to discuss. So while walking, they talked about books. Sagar told that he was more into romance and murder mysteries. On the other hand, Sai talked about her love for thrillers written by Dan Brown and Harry Potter Series. They didn't even realize when they reached their destination. They entered the same Mango Tree restaurant, where they had lunch in the afternoon.
The place looked lit up in the evening. It was filled with music, lights, and laughter. In a corner, few Indians and tourists were jamming songs with guitar, drums, and flute. It was a surreal experience for Sai, especially for Sagar, who experienced such bliss for the first time. He felt that for the first time, the world was not running somewhere to achieve something. The world was celebrating its presence.
Sagar and Sai ordered tea and coffee with finger chips. The food arrived, and while sipping tea and coffee, Sagar and Sai talked about food and their mutual love for it. Sagar said that he loved momos while Sai spoke about her evergreen fondness for doughnuts and pastries. The beauty of food is that it brings people close instantly.
After eating, they both walked towards the local bus stand. The bus arrived, and they hopped into it. They occupied the last row of corner seats. The young lady conductor smiled at them and asked their destination; Sai replied, "Hospet Market." She gave two tickets to Sai and took 20 bucks in return. The bus started, and it was relatively empty. The cold wind was blowing, and they both felt like slowing down.
Sagar rested his head on the window. Sai was looking outside.

"I don't remember when was the last time I traveled in a bus and that too one with a female conductor. How refreshing things are over here! Thank you for this experience, Sai."
"You are welcome, Sagar. You too have a refreshing way of looking at things," Sai said as she patted Sagar's back.
After 30 minutes, they both got down at Hospet Market from where the Malligi Hotel was at a walking distance of 10 minutes. Sai and Sagar decided to walk to their hotel while exploring the Hospet Market.
Sagar spotted a shop and said, "See this side. It's the famous Bangalore Iyengar Bakery. Let's grab your favorite cake. What do you say?"
Sai smiled, looking at Sagar, and said, "Let's go."
They both crossed the road and entered the bakery. They were welcomed by the aroma of freshly baked cookies, which enveloped them inside out. There were many pastries and cakes which were kept inside the refrigerator. Sai saw all of them and also read their names. But her old soul and heart opted for the freshly made hot mawa cake.
She bought two pieces. She gave one to Sagar and kept one for herself. She said, "Try it fast."
"No, first you have it; you are the cake lover," Sagar spoke with a smile.
"Okay."
Sai couldn't resist anymore. She dug the spoon inside the mawa cupcake and had her first bite. She closed her eyes as different tastes of mawa, saffron, and elaichi melted inside her mouth.
"How's it?" Sagar asked
"Superb! This is the best thing I have eaten today!" Sai was indeed feeling complete and joyful after eating the mawa cake.
Sagar and Sai finished eating the cake and walked off towards their hotel. Sai spoke, "Tell me something, anything?"
Sagar replied, "Umm, this may sound philosophical, but I observed you while eating that cake. You looked delighted. You really find happiness in simple things. I don't know why it feels good to say this."
Sai smiled and looked at Sagar. She realized that he indeed observed things. She said, "Thanks, the thing is that happiness is happiness. People who have everything are still unhappy, and some people have very little and still manage to smile every day. For me, it's simple. I don't postpone happiness."
After that, they silently reached their hotel.

Once inside the hotel lobby, Sagar and Sai didn't know what to do. Because it was 10 pm already, and there was no call or message from their friends Malar and Harsh.
"Did you try calling them?" Sai asked.
"Yeah, their phones are switched off," Sagar said.
Sai went to the reception and gave details about their room number. The receptionist informed them that some time back, food was ordered from Malar and Sai's room.
"So they are inside your room," Sagar said as they walked towards the hotel's open-air restaurant for some light dinner.
"Yeah, and we should not disturb them. So I have to sleep in your room," Sai said nonchalantly as if everything was normal, but Sagar was scared as shit.
They ordered two Mysore cheese dosas. Sagar mustered the courage to ask Sai, "Will you be comfortable in my room?"
Sai saw fears in Sagar's eyes. He was tasting sambhar. She couldn't control her laughter. "I will not be comfortable with anyone else but you. I am okay; I know you will not do anything, hahaha."
The sambhar from Sagar's mouth dripped out when he heard Sai's words. Sai laughed even more.

INSIDE SAGAR'S ROOM
At around 11 pm, they both entered the room.
Sagar tried to warn her, "Be aware, my room might be a little dirty," he said as he switched on the lights.
Sai looked around the room, and few clothes were lying across. She said, "I have seen worse things. You forgot that I used to live in a hostel.
Sagar replied as he was removing his shoes, "Yeah. You can go and freshen up."
"Hmmm, what will I wear?" Sai *asked*
Sagar was about to lose balance on hearing her words. He said, "I didn't get you?" He was nervous and tried to not show it on his face.
Sai understood Sagar's nervousness. With a smile, she said, "I mean, I have been wearing this kurti and legging since morning, so I can't sleep wearing them. I don't want to disturb the couple, so if you have something, then please give it to me."

"Oh, wait!" Sagar went and opened his bag. He took out a black t-shirt and blue cotton track shorts and gave it to Sai.
He said, "I hope it works" He was giving his clothes to a girl for the first time in his life.
Sai laughed. She said, "I think it will work for the night," and went inside to take a bath.
Sagar didn't know what to do in his free time inside the room, which he shared with a girl who was currently taking a bath. All this was happening for the first time. He thought, "How can a girl trust me?" or "Am I really trustworthy?"
He cleared all the questions and put his phone on charging. Soon Sai came out wearing the black t-shirt and blue shorts, and she looked cute to Sagar.
Before Sagar spoke, Sai said
"It's a perfect size, thanks."
Sagar tried to fake it and said, "I knew such a situation would arise, so I packed one pair of clothes for you."
Sai made a face and replied, "Shut up and go for a bath. You are kind of stinking."
Sagar did not say anything. He got up and went straight inside the bathroom. He even took his clothes with him because he couldn't come out shirtless in front of Sai. After 10 minutes, Sagar came out wearing a Marvel Avenger t-shirt with black track pants,
Sai asked, "So, are you feeling fresh?"
"Yeah. The hot water helped. I don't even remember when was the last time I had such a good bath," Sagar said.
Sai was sitting on the bed and using her phone. She kept it aside on the table. She said, "Come sit."
Sagar sat on the edge opposite to Sai. They both were silent for a few seconds when Sagar suddenly laughed and said
"You know, while bathing, I was thinking that I never imagined two of my best friends falling in love and sharing the same room. It's overwhelming."
Sai smiled. She said, "Love is magical, Sagar. It just happens. Tell me, have you ever been in true love with someone?"
Sagar thought about it for a few seconds. His mind drifted to Priya first and then on to Devaki. But there was no answer.
He just said, "I have a few experiences, but I don't know what do you mean by true love?"

"You know it when you are with the person and time stops. You forget everything. It's just that person and you."
"I don't think that I have experienced something like that," Sagar answered honestly.
"You will know it when you meet someone real," Sai said. She could sense a bit of sadness inside Sagar's eyes.
"What about you? Have you ever been in true love?" Sagar asked this time.
Sai laughed. "I knew this was coming. I had a few very temporary boyfriends. Once I went to Bangalore, I didn't like anyone. Few boys proposed to me, but for me, it had to be someone worth it. So nothing worked out. But I can say that I fell in true love with Hampi. This place changed me, and now I can't get over this. It's like you can remove me from Hampi but not Hampi from me."
Sagar was taken aback by her last few words "That was deep. Indeed the love can be seen in your eyes when you talk about Hampi."
Sai's heart was full of what she had just said, "I think you should lie down because you don't have any back support, and you must be tired. So come, we should try to sleep because it's pretty late and we have to get up at five in the morning."
The nervousness was back. Sagar said, "It's fine. I can sleep on the sofa. You sleep on the bed."
"Sagar, it's completely fine. We can sleep together. You are my friend, and I trust you," Sai reassured Sagar.
Sagar went and sat next to Sai. They talked, and soon they both lied down. By 12 am, they switched off the lights, but their conversation was still going on. Sagar confessed that it was the first time he was sleeping with a girl. Sai laughed and said that it was evident on his face ever since they had entered the room. Sai was the first one to doze off. Sagar saw her face; she slept with her mouth open. It was funny and cute. After a few minutes, Sagar too slept, sharing the same blanket with her.

Chapter 31

"When you meet the 'one', you realize that you are meeting your reflection for the first time."

Sai was the first one to wake up in the morning, around 4:15 am. She smiled and stretched her arms lazily. Then her eyes fell on Sagar, who was sleeping with his mouth a little bit open. Sai found it to be funny and cute. She tapped on his shoulder to wake him up. After a few seconds, Sagar slowly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Sai's smiling face.
She said, "Good morning! Get ready fast. We have to leave in 10 minutes."
Sagar just kept looking at Sai while trying to open his eyes and then spoke, "Good Morning, Sai." Sagar felt good waking up next to Sai. It just felt right. Sai got up, tied her hair, and said, "I am going to wake up the couple. You get ready fast."

Sai reached outside Harsh and Malar's room and rang the bell. After two rings, Harsh was the one to wake up. He saw Malar sleeping peacefully. He smiled, got up to wear his clothes, and went to open the door.
Sai said, "Hey, good morning. We have to go to Matanga Hill to see the sunrise in the next 10 minutes. The cab is waiting."
Harsh said, "Oh! We will get ready in 10 minutes," he was still half-sleep.
"Actually, my clothes are in this room, and I have to also change," Sai said awkwardly.
"Oh shit, sorry! I completely forgot. Just give me one minute; I will be back," Harsh said and closed the door.
He went to Malar and, tapping his hands on her right cheek, gently woke her up. Malar smiled and said, "Good morning, baby."
Harsh kissed her forehead, "Morning sunshine. Now get up fast, we have to go to see the sunrise. I am going to my room because Sai is waiting outside."
By then, Malar also got up and wore her clothes. She said, "Okay, see you in 10," Harsh left the room, and Sai entered.

10 minutes later, all four of them were down and ready. Sagar and Sai didn't ask Harsh and Malar anything because that would have made things very awkward. They all sat inside the cab, and exactly at 5:05 am, they all

went for Hampi. On the way, they spotted coffee and idli stalls being set up, and steam was rising from the idli machines.

As the car windows were rolled down, the cool Hampi breeze enveloped them. At 5:40 am, they reached the base of Matanga Hill. It was completely dark around. No people, no lights, nothing, just bright stars, and the white moon.

Sai explained, "So guys, we have to trek and reach the top of Matanga Hill. There are no lights, but the directions are pointed on the boulders, which we will see on our way. We'll walk together in pairs holding hands. One will hold the flashlight, and the other will walk slowly. Let's go."

Sai and Malar turned on their phone's flashlight, and they all started trekking. Sai had done this before, so she was leading the troop. Sagar was holding her hand and following her. Harsh and Malar too followed them holding hands.

Sai spoke while walking, "The stones on the way are uneven. Make sure that your ankle doesn't get twisted because the last time mine got twisted, and then the pain was quite something."

Sagar interrupted and said, "All that is fine, but what if a snake comes on our way? What if a ghost is following us? I am not getting good vibes."

Malar laughed. "I don't know about snakes, but that ghost will surely not do anything to you. Don't worry."

Everyone laughed. Sagar made a face and looked at Malar. He said, "Keep quiet and don't talk to me." Malar thought as to why Sagar spoke in such a way.

Sai broke their thoughts and said, "Guys, let's increase our speed. Only 20 minutes are left for the sunrise. We are close."

Walking slowly and watching their steps, they all reached the top of Matanga Hill. There they saw few people from different parts of the world waiting for the sun to rise and spread its light on them and this world. Sai gave water to Sagar, and then he passed it to Malar and Harsh.

By now, the darkness was slowly getting overpowered by the light, and all the birds, trees, animals, and living beings were singing and dancing to welcome the day. For them, it was once again the victory of light over darkness. All four of them sat on the edge of Matanga Hill facing the east direction.

Sai said, "Guys, this moment will be painted inside our hearts forever. So let's hold hands and welcome the sun."

Sai, Sagar, Malar, and Harsh held each other's hands and observed how beautiful a simple sunrise could be.

Slowly all the trees, boulders, ruins, and Tungabhadra River started to become visible. Birds were flying and singing, and the planet was painting its own art. The sky was the canvas. Exactly at 6:45 am, the sun rose, and it felt like time had stopped. In that moment, nothing mattered. What mattered was the beauty and the beholder. No words could explain the beauty which the four of them experienced. And for the sun, what mattered was there were the eyes to see it.

Sai had tears in her eyes. Her dream of making other people experience the beauty of Hampi got fulfilled. Sagar saw her and the sunrise. It was the most beautiful moment of his life.

For Harsh and Malar, nothing was left to achieve after that. The sunrise completed them. They were one now.

For a temporary period, the sunlight had wiped away the loneliness that was present around. All the world problems seemed insignificant in that moment of creation and new beginning.

They all got up after 30 minutes. By now, the sun had reached its zenith. They all clicked a few pictures, and Sai also recorded some videos. A young boy was selling tea up there. They all had tea. Even Sai, who was originally a coffee lover, gave in to tea. That's the special thing about tea in India. Almost everyone must have shared their special moments while sipping tea.

Sagar went and stood alone, sipping tea in the corner. Malar went and stood next to him.

Sagar didn't say anything. Instead, Malar said, "I am sorry."

"Why are you, sorry? Sagar asked.

"I should have told you about Harsh and me. To be honest, Sagar, even I don't know when all this happened. Thank you for bringing Harsh into my life."

Sagar looked into Malar's eyes and said, "You don't have to be sorry. I am the happiest when I see you happy. Now give me a hug." Both friends shared a sweet hug.

Then Sagar said, "There are a few things that I will tell you once we get back to Mumbai."

Malar said, "Okay."

They both were walking towards Sai and Harsh. Sagar spoke with a wink. "By the way, what did you guys do last night?"
Malar blushed and punched Sagar…

The day had started, and the real struggle was about to begin. The four of them got down from the Matanga Hill at around 7:45 am and sat inside their cab. In some time, they reached back to their hotel. They had breakfast and went into their respective rooms to rest for some time.

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Harsh put his phone on charging as he had switched it off since one day. He then went for a bath and came out after 10 minutes. Sagar was writing something in his diary; Harsh didn't disturb him and instead switched on his mobile. There were many notifications but what caught his attention was a message from Khushboo.
"Harsh, where are you? I have been trying to call you since yesterday. Call me ASAP. Your dad came to know about everything. Call me soon. ☹ "

After reading the message, Harsh's heart started beating faster. His hands were shaking, and his world came crashing down in front of his eyes. He somehow tapped on Khushboo's number and called her.
"Hey! So finally, you called?" Khushboo said.
"What happened?" Harsh said in a serious tone.
"Nothing. Your father came to know about everything, and he was quite angry. I don't know how, but I tried to calm him down. He seemed very angry and left for Mumbai." Khushboo spoke in a serious tone this time. Harsh was at a loss of words. "Oh shit, Khushboo! I don't know what will happen now. Everything is over," he felt really anxious. He wanted to escape the face of the world.
Khushboo kept quiet for a few seconds, and then suddenly, she started laughing.
She said, "Oh, Harsh! It is so easy to fool you. Calm down; nothing happened. I just messaged because I wanted you to call me."
At that moment, Harsh wanted to kill her. He wanted to bang her face on a wall and throw his phone. He was angry and wanted to use all the cuss words he knew. Instead, he just said, "Okay."
"I am sorry, but there is some good news," Khushboo was excited now.
"What?"

What Khushboo said next brought Harsh's world crashing down in front of his eyes. She said, "Congratulations! Our marriage has been fixed for exactly 45 days from now. Our fathers decided mutually. The earlier, the better.
Darkness started to envelop Harsh's life after he heard her words.

Procrastination of truth will lead to expectations of lies. The four left for their second day of exploring Hampi. They went to Virupaksha Temple and explored Hippie Island. They had lunch at a cute little café called The Good Luck Café. After that, they all went to see the Anjaneya Hill, which was the birthplace of Lord Hanuman.

All this while, Harsh was acting like a mere robot. He was talking, smiling, eating, clicking pictures, but it was all fake. His body felt lifeless. Inside his head, it was chaotic. The future looked doomed, and the mere idea of separating from Malar was so painful that he dreaded thinking about it.

All his life, he had never taken a stand for what he wanted. And now, when it was time, he didn't have the courage. The worst part was that he hadn't told anything about his family or Khushboo to Malar. He thought things would work out, but now it was all a mess. For the first time, everything was working against him. He didn't want to marry Khushboo. He didn't want to stay away from Malar. He didn't want to let down his parents.

The only thing his parents wanted from him was to marry the girl they liked, but Harsh had broken that rule.

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It was around 5:45 pm when they all reached Hemakuta Hill near Virupaksha Temple for experiencing their last sunset in Hampi.

Sai and Sagar were fooling around, clicking bad pictures of each other, and talking with some foreigners.

Harsh and Malar went and sat on the beach. From that place, the sunset was clearly visible. Malar realized something was amiss with Harsh, but she kept quiet and kept her right hand over his left. That touch made Harsh feel that his nightmares were about to come true.

What would happen when Malar would come to know all about the truth he had kept hidden from her? What if she would go away forever?

He knew that what he did was wrong. He slept with her even without telling her that he was already engaged. No. Malar deserved to know the truth, no matter what happened.

Harsh spoke, "Malar, I am getting married to a girl named Khushboo after 45 days."

Malar looked at him and said, "Haha, okay! You know you should work on your jokes."

This time Harsh looked into Malar's eyes and said everything that he had kept hidden. He told her about his samaj, where love marriages to the outside caste were not allowed. And about his break up with Ayushi and how she got married to someone for money. Also, about his engagement with Khushboo, about how he lied to his parents to come to Hampi, and about the morning when Khushboo told him that they were supposed to get married in the next 45 days.

When an accident that we had not imagined in our wildest dreams occurs, we are shocked for a few seconds. That's what happened with Malar. Her body felt stuck onto that bench. She kept looking at the sun, which was about to set. She took away her hand, which was maintained over Harsh's hand.

She said, "Why didn't you tell me this before? At Least before we slept together yesterday?" There was a lot of pain and betrayal in Malar's voice and eyes.

Harsh didn't have an answer for the mistake that he had committed. He kept silent, and that broke Malar.

She tried one more time, saying, "Will you fight for us with your family?"

This time Harsh was silent. He looked down as if he had given up on his life and love.

This broke Malar's heart completely. A tear ran down from her eye, and felt cheated and naked. She got up and went towards Sagar and Sai.

She said to Sagar, "I want to go back to the hotel now! I want to return back to Mumbai immediately!"

Sagar saw her tears. Something was horribly wrong. He asked, "What happened? Why are you crying?"

"Are you coming, or should I go alone?" Malar shouted as tears rolled down her eyes. She started walking towards the parking lot. Sagar and Sai ran towards her.

Sagar kept his hand on her shoulder to stop her and said, "Malar, please tell me what happened? Did Harsh say anything? Please don't cry. I am there for you!"
Malar lost all her control. She slapped Sagar with all her might and said, "Don't ever show me this fucking sympathy," and with that, she went away towards the cab.

Sagar had never thought that his best friend would slap him. Sai held Sagar. She, too, had never imagined that her dream trip would end on such a note. The sun had set entirely down. Darkness started to take over the day.

NEXT DAY MUMBAI

The hired driver drove the car nonstop and reached Mumbai the next day in the afternoon. Sai and Sagar were shocked by such behavior from Malar.

From the sunset point in Hampi, she sat in the cab and went to the hotel. Sagar, Sai, and Harsh had to take the local bus to reach the hotel. During the journey, Sagar asked Harsh about what had happened.
After a little hesitation, Harsh told Sagar everything.
Sagar was furious, listening to it. He banged his hand on the window of the bus.
He shouted loudly, "You fucking coward; you were already engaged! Why didn't you tell her that before? Do you even know what Malar went through with her ex-boyfriend? Harsh, if something happens to her, I am surely going to kill you, and we would not be friends anymore."
"Sagar, please help me. I can't stay away from Malar. I love her," Harsh was literally crying.
"You asshole! Don't you dare say that you love her. Love takes courage, and you bloody, don't have it!" Sagar was about to smash Harsh's face, but Sai stopped him.
She said, "Can you stop for God's sake? We can talk once we reach the hotel."

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Once inside the hotel room, Malar started to pack all her bags. Sai went in alone to talk to her.
Before she could say anything, Malar shouted, "I want to go to Mumbai now. If you want to come, then it's fine; otherwise, I will find my own

way."
Sai went towards her and replied, "Malar, it's already late. We will leave tomorrow morning. Please calm down."
"Don't try to calm me down! I will leave in the next 10 minutes alone. I don't want any fuckers like you to help me." Malar was agitated and was losing it all.
Sai hadn't seen Malar in such a state before. She said, "Okay, we will leave now. Let me tell the boys to pack their bags" This made Malar shout even louder.
"What boys? Only I, you, and Sagar will leave. I don't want that piece of shit to come with us."
"But Malar, who will drive the car then?"
"We will hire a driver from the travel desk at the reception. I will pay. I don't want to see him for even a second more. You got it?" Sai didn't say anything. She just left the room.
Harsh and Sagar were standing outside and listening to everything. Sai said, "She wants us to leave now and doesn't want Harsh to come with us."
Harsh said, "That's fine. I will take a bus from here but please, Sagar, try to help me. Please listen to me," he was also crying by now.
"You should have thought about all this before sharing the room with her without telling her your truth." Sagar was angry, but his tone was soft.
"Sagar, I know I have made mistakes, but you know my samaj, my parents. I feel paralyzed when I am in front of them. But I love Malar. Please help me. Look into my eyes. I love Malar, and that's the only truth of my life. Please." Harsh was begging and crying at the same time.
Sagar kept his hand on Horse's shoulder. He said, "See Harsh, what you did was wrong, so I can't do anything right now. Let's go to Mumbai, and then I will see. If you really love Malar go and tell everything to your parents. Then we will see."
"Okay," Harsh managed to say just that because his biggest fear in his life was to tell the truth to his parents.

In the next hour, Malar, Sagar, and Sai left after hiring a Mumbai driver. No one spoke anything during the journey. Only two breaks were taken, and Malar didn't eat anything. She kept looking out of the window towards the darkness.

Once they reached their building in Mumbai, Malar paid the driver, took her bags by herself, and said, "Please don't try to contact me for some time.

If I want anything, I will tell you," saying this, she went towards her house.

Chapter 32

Harsh also reached Mumbai the next day after taking a bus from Hospet. Throughout the journey, he kept asking himself as to how he had allowed himself to be such a coward. On the other hand, he saw images of what would happen if he married Malar. His parents would cry and be thrown out of the samaj. It would be chaotic, and Harsh was drawn inside a bottomless pit.

As he reached home, his parents congratulated him on the fixation of his marriage. Harsh faked a smile, but he realized how happy his parents looked.

Harsh's father asked, "So how was your trip?"

"It was good," Harsh kept it short.

"Sit here."

Harsh sat opposite his father while his mother gave him some water.

"So the marriage will take place in Surat inside the biggest banquet hall of the city. We have to go and buy the Mangalsutra for Khushboo. When you have time, go and bring Khushboo to Mumbai so that she can choose according to her likes and size," Harsh's father explained.

Harsh thought for a second and said, "Okay. I will go tomorrow itself. It's been a long time since I met her." Harsh had some other plans in his mind.

His father said, "Okay. Harsh, you both are going to be husband and wife in the next 45 days. So you have to spend more time with her. She has planned a pre-wedding photoshoot and a pre-wedding trailer. She was talking about all this when I went. So make sure you happily participate in what she says."

Harsh just nodded. He just couldn't even imagine doing a photoshoot with Khushboo. He couldn't take it anymore. Before all of this, he just wanted to love someone like it happened in movies. But then Aayushi left him for money, and by the time he found love, he was already in a bigger mess. He realized that there was only one way out of it. Only Khushboo could cancel the wedding.

The next day, Harsh left for Surat to meet Khushboo. Khushboo asked him to come to her house, but Harsh insisted on meeting outside, so they

met inside a local café.
Khushboo extended her hand towards Harsh for a handshake and said, "Congrats on our wedding. I don't feel anything. You know I am going to get married. I should be excited, na?"
Harsh shook her hand and said, "Khushboo, I need to talk about something very important."
Khushboo looked at him and smiled. "I know what you want to talk about. So chill."
Harsh was shocked. How could she know? He asked, "Tell me, then what is it about?"
Khushboo said, "That day when you were in Goa, I told your father that Harsh and I would want to go to Newzealand for our honeymoon. That time your father said no to me because everyone was around. But I understand that it's costly. Don't worry, my father would sponsor it."
For the first time, Harsh felt anger running in his veins. He just couldn't take the bullshit anymore.
He banged the table loudly and said, "Don't you have a sense about what to talk about, Khushboo? At Least be a little bit mature!"

Everyone sitting around, including the waiters, stared at their table. Khushboo felt humiliated. Never in her life had any boy spoken to her in such a way. She got up and started walking away.
"Shit!" Harsh exclaimed. He realized that it was his only opportunity, and he couldn't let it go. He stood up and ran behind her to stop her.
"Khushboo, I am really sorry. Please listen to me."
Khushboo turned around and looked straight into Harsh's eyes. She said, "Don't you dare talk to me like that! This should be the first and the last time."
"Okay, I am sorry. Please listen to me."
They both went to the same cafe and sat on the same table. "Khushboo, I love someone else!" Harsh said with a heavy heart.
"I know you loved Aayushi, but she married someone else for money. Next?"
Harsh then explained everything about him and Malar and that he loved her immensely.
Khushboo thought for a second and replied, "Harsh, you already know that there is no place for love in our caste, and the seeds of hatred are planted in us since childhood. Even I used to love someone but look; now I am here

with you. Move on, and if you want, you can continue your affair with her after marriage. I am okay with it because there can't be love between us. And after a few years, when the families start forcing us for a child, we would have sex and give them a child."
Harsh couldn't believe his ears. How could a girl be so regressive in the 21st century? But then he remembered that he was also a part of such regression. No, he couldn't steep down to such a level. He clearly started, "Khushboo, I can't marry you. Please cancel the marriage."
"Why would I cancel the marriage? If you love someone else, then have the guts to go out and publicly cancel it. But, I know you will not do that because you are a coward." Khushboo was agitated by now.
"Khushboo, it's not about being a coward. You know how our families are; that's why I am requesting you."
"No, Harsh. I am sorry. I can't cancel it because afterwards, no one would come forward to marry me. You tell your parents, cancel it, and openly say that you don't want to marry me because you love someone else," Khushboo said everything very clearly.
Harsh kept quiet because he didn't know what to say. His plans had already started to fail. He couldn't cancel the marriage as his parents would face the wrath of his samaj and society.
Khushboo spoke after some time, "See Harsh, I know you don't like me, but everyone in our samaj is just plainly acting. In fact, our parents are acting that they wish the best for us, but all they care about is their reputation around everyone. So just act around everyone, and if you can't act, then have the courage to tell the truth."
Harsh asked, "Don't you have the courage to tell the truth to your parents?"
Khushboo smiled. "Once I had the courage, and I spoke the truth, but then I realized that my father has so much money and contacts that the boy I loved had to leave this city and go somewhere, where he could never find me. Since then, I have settled for acting."

Harsh and Khushboo then went to Mumbai, and with Harsh's parents, they went to select the Mangalsutra for Khushboo. Harsh saw her smiling and laughing as if nothing had ever happened, and looking at her, he realized that he couldn't act. It was better to end it rather than live his whole life faking it.

The next day he went back to drop Khushboo in Surat. While getting down, Khushboo said, "After five days, we have our photoshoot, so make

sure you reach here on time."

Chapter 33

When Malar closed her eyes, everything was just about him. When she opened them, she just couldn't stay with herself. When Malar reached home after that day in Hampi, she locked herself in her room and kept crying for hours. Her crying was just a small physical manifestation of the pain that she felt inside her.
Her mother asked about her trip and what had happened to her.
Malar cried and told her mom everything about Harsh. Malar also asked her mom, "Why am I always at the receiving end of life?"
Her mother hugged her and said, "Beta, I don't have an answer to your question. But I also felt the same when your father left us." Malar lay on her mother's lap and cried.

Malar couldn't sleep that night and many other nights to follow. There were many questions inside her head. The biggest question was, "Why did Harsh do this to me?"

Whenever she looked into his eyes, everything felt real and genuine. When they made love, it felt as if the entire universe had come alive. But now it all seemed fake and cryptic.

Malar couldn't even face herself when she looked into the mirror because she couldn't believe how easily she had been fooled. How easily she had let people come close to her. With her ex-boyfriend Nimit it had ended mutually, but here everything was one-sided. Harsh ended it, and she never imagined it in her wildest dreams.

Malar resigned from her job even without completing the notice period. Her health deteriorated, and the weight that she had shredded while working out was slowly coming back on her body.

Sagar and Sai tried to call her, but when she saw their call, she switched off her phone, took out the SIM card, and flushed it into the toilet. She didn't want anyone to come close to her anymore.

She even maintained a distance from her mom and just said "Okay" to everything she asked.

There was a constant struggle within her to even think straight. Problems don't start when you see darkness, but it starts when you begin to see darkness even when there is light around.

Her day began with thinking why she couldn't change the flow of time and go back to her old days with Harsh, where everything seemed so magical. Slowly inside her head, all the thoughts and emotions related to Harsh started to gather. In some moments, she even wished to forget everything and forgive Harsh and continue their relationship, but then another conflicting thought would hit her mind, which said, "A guy who couldn't stand up for his love is not worth the time and love."

By the time the day ended, her body and mind were captured by anxiety, and she would feel her heartbeat so fast that she wanted it to stop. There was a hollowness inside her stomach, and her mind was constantly restless. At nights she would grind her teeth together and shake her right leg.

One day she decided to have a haircut. Around noon, she left her house almost after 15 days. As she reached down, the traffic, noise, and pollution seemed to irritate her.

She tried crossing the road, and the memory of her holding Harsh's hand while crossing the road overpowered her. She subconsciously moved her right hand and tried to hold the person's hand next to her, but there was no one. The realization hit her very hard. There was no Harsh around her. She ran back to her house, took a pair of scissors, and cut her hair by herself, standing in front of the bathroom mirror. With hair, her tears also moved down her face.

Along with Malar, her best friend, Sagar, was also equally affected. He and Sai would sit, and Sagar would speak about how it felt when Malar had hit him. He felt helpless that he couldn't help her. Harsh called him multiple times, asking about Malar, but Sagar's reply was always the same.

"Harsh, she is not even talking to me. I can't do anything. You have to stop the marriage."

Harsh would cry and even beg sometimes, "Sagar, please help me. I can't cancel the marriage. I feel like I am caged over here. Please, help me!"

Listening to this, Sagar would hang up the call. He felt more helpless than ever. What lay ahead was only darkness.

Chapter 34

A month passed. Harsh tried everything, but nothing worked to stop his marriage.

Pre-wedding photo shoots took place, and even the pre-wedding video was recorded. Harsh hated his guts when he had to fake it every time the photographer asked him to smile. He requested that Khushboo not upload the pictures on social media, but she didn't listen and uploaded all their photos on Facebook and Instagram tagged him too. That day he deleted all his social media accounts. The last and only option he had was to tell everything to his parents.

Only 15 days were left for the marriage, and the wedding cards had been distributed to everyone. Telling his parents the truth was Harsh's biggest fear.

He told himself, "No, Harsh! You can't let this happen. For the last 30 days, you have been living like a robot; the human inside you is dead. Speak the truth!"

Another voice of fear would speak inside his head, "Harsh, just think about your parents' respect in the samaj. You can't be so selfish. Be a good son and marry Khushboo."

Harsh felt paralyzed. His body didn't move and felt stuck. It appeared that everything was beyond control. That's when his phone rang.

It was Khushboo. Harsh disconnected the call; she called again. This time after a few rings, he picked it up.

Khushboo spoke with authority, "Never disconnect my call."

Harsh tried to argue but replied, "Okay."

"Now listen. Leave everything and come to Surat now. I need to talk to you about something very important."

"Tell me over the phone," Harsh said.

"Harsh, you are not in a position to argue. Just come. You will not be disappointed."

Harsh couldn't argue more. He left for Surat the next morning and reached there around 3 pm. He and Khushboo met at the same café where they had met the last time.

After settling down, Khushboo started to speak, "Harsh, I know that you don't want to marry me because you love someone else. First of all, I am really sorry for the way I have been treating you."
Harsh was shocked. He hadn't expected such a sudden transformation. He said, "It's okay, Khushboo."
Khushboo continued, "Now listen to me very carefully. Yesterday, I got a call from your ex-girlfriend Aayushi. She said that she wanted to meet me before she left for America today. I agreed and met her. Harsh, I am sorry to say this, but you have been fooled since the beginning."
Harsh didn't know what to say. His brain was already occupied with so many thoughts that he didn't have the energy for one more problem to surface in his life.
He asked, "What do you mean?'
Khsuhboo took a deep breath, kept her hand over Harsh's hand, and held it. She said
"Harsh, Aayushi didn't leave you for money. It was all set up by your father. He called Aayushi's father and said that you couldn't marry Aayushi because you and your family were only looking to get married to a rich family. Your father insulted Aayushi's father, saying that you wouldn't even enter his poor house. He further insulted him by asking him to first get rich and then dream of his daughter getting married to you. Otherwise, find a rich family and get their daughter wedded off. He asked him to not ruin your life; otherwise, he would destroy his reputation in the samaj by alleging that he had trained his daughter to be a gold digger; that's why she captured an innocent boy like you.
"Aayushi's father couldn't take the insult from your father. He was ready to marry off Aayushi to you, but your father destroyed his ego, and that's why he got Aayushi married to someone who respected him and Aayushi a lot. Yesterday Aayushi cried a lot after coming to know that your father lied to you. It was all your father's plan. He wanted you to marry me because my father is super-rich. When I came to know all this, I couldn't take it, and that's why I want you to fight for Malar."

Tears flowed down Harsh's eyes. He was angry, and at the same time, he felt cheated. His father traded him and his love for money. He felt worse than the person who sells his or her body for money. His head was spinning. He wanted Malar to hug him so that he could cry. Khushboo also kept silent. She just let Harsh be. After a while, Harsh asked.

"What did Aayushi say about me?"
"I told her that you now love someone else and don't want to marry me. She requested me to tell you everything and also to help you."
"I don't know. What should I do now, Khushboo?" Harsh felt clueless.
"Go and confront your father. You have the control now. Tell him with confidence that you love someone else and can't marry me. It's time to fight Harsh." Khushboo said it looking straight into his eyes. There was a raw force in her voice, which suggested destruction.

Harsh realized that it was the time to stand up for himself. He couldn't live without Malar. He took out his phone and called Sagar. The call went unanswered. Harsh called two more times, but the result was the same.
He said to Khushboo, "Can you do one last thing for me, Khushboo?"
"Yes, sure."
"Take this number. It is of my friend Sagar. Call him and tell him everything. He stays in Malar's building, and because of him, I met Malar. He will not pick up my call and would definitely not talk to me. So tell him that if my phone is ever switched off after today, he should come to my house to check on me. He will understand," Harsh explained. He got up to leave. But before that, he hugged Khushboo. She was the first person who had believed in him.

He was raging with anger. He sat inside the car and accelerated it to confront his father, who had literally sold him for money and his worthless samaj.

Chapter 35

Harsh and Malar entered her bedroom. They looked into each other's eyes and started undressing each other. They made love like there was no tomorrow. After making love, Harsh started laughing loudly. Harsh put his clothes on, but Malar was still naked. Her clothes were nowhere to be found.

She asked Harsh, "Why are you laughing?"

Harsh continued laughing. "Just look at you, fat bitch. Your first boyfriend left you because you became so ugly that his dick wouldn't get up looking at you. And now I will leave you after fucking you because you are a fucking worthless piece of shit," saying this, Harsh left, leaving Malar forever in darkness.

Malar got up around 12 am suddenly after a devilish nightmare. Her nightmares had returned in the past one week, and because of them, she dreaded sleeping now. It had been over a month now, and Malar had gained back the weight that she had lost with Harsh's help. The nightmare made her puke, and her body was drenched in sweat. She ran inside the bathroom to empty her gut. After puking, she felt dizzy and that she would pass out at any moment.

She looked into the wash basin's mirror and splashed some water on her face. She looked into her eyes. There were dark bags under her eyes, and her uneven hair made her look like she needed medical help.

She kept looking at herself and the moments of the nightmare started to play in her mind. She went back to the day in Hampi, where she and Harsh had sex. How could she be so stupid? She felt like a worthless whore. She again looked into her eyes and started slapping herself hard. After slapping herself for around 15 times, Malar started crying. She went back to her bedroom and passed out on the bed.

What's worse than any disease in the world is when you can't live with yourself. Malar was going through a phase where she hated her own skin, body, and everything about her. She constantly lived inside her mind, where she lost her worth even more.

When she woke up after an hour of passing out, she thought, what if she could pass out forever so that she didn't have to feel the pain again. It was only during sleeping that she had her nightmares, and when she was awake, she was her biggest nightmare. Only when she had passed out 10 times in the last seven days had she felt zero pain. Two more hours passed, and she convinced herself that passing out forever was the only option because she couldn't take the pain anymore. She knew she had to end it at the same place where everything had started. She went into the hall, took the keys from the key stand, and left for the building terrace at 4 pm.

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At 3:45 pm, 15 minutes before Malar left for the terrace, Sagar got a call from an unknown number. He and Sai were sitting inside a café in Malad East drinking hot chocolate. Sagar didn't pick it up the first time. He then got a call again from the same number. Sai saw it and said, "Pick it up. It must be something important."
Sagar finally picked up the call.
"Hello."
"Hello, Sagar?" a female voice asked.
"Yes, tell me," Sagar couldn't recognize the voice.
"I am Khushboo, Harsh's fiancé. Harsh asked me to call you."
Sagar interrupted Khushboo in between and said, "Actually, I am busy somewhere. Can I call you later?"
"Sagar, Harsh told me that you are his best friend, so stop ignoring and listen to me very carefully." Khushboo had the power of taking control of the situation, anytime anywhere. She was a true feminist despite not trying to be one.
Sagar was taken aback. He managed to say, "Okay."
Khushboo told him everything and how Harsh had gone to confront his father to stop the wedding.
She said, "He will call you in some time but if that doesn't happen, then go to his house. It's high time that you help him, and please save my number. Stay in touch. We have to help the couple in love to get back together."
Sagar was very happy listening to Khushboo. "Thank you so much, Khushboo."
Before hanging up, Khushboo said, "And please go and tell Malar that her lover is not a coward. He just needs help."

After the call, Sagar told Sai everything, and they reached the building at around 4:00 pm. He was excited to tell Malar that things were not over yet. Her love story was not doomed.

He and Sai reached outside Malar's house and rang the bell. No one opened the door. By chance in excitement, Sagar held the door's handle and pulled it absentmindedly. The door drew open suddenly.

Sagar and Sai looked at each other, trying to understand why the door was open. They both went inside and called out to Malar, but no one answered. Sagar went inside the bedroom to check and found that the room was messed up.

Sagar then heard Sai calling him from inside the bathroom.

Sagar ran and what he saw next made him shit his pants. There was puke on the floor, and its pungent smell made Sai and Sagar close the bathroom door immediately.

Sai looked at Sagar, "Something is very wrong." She said.

Sagar took out his phone and called Malar's mother. She picked it up soon, "Hello, aunty! Is Malar with you?" Sagar asked.

"No beta. I am at the office. She must be at home."

"Okay, aunty. Thanks," Sagar hung up the call immediately.

Something was seriously very wrong. He and Sai went to the hall and looked around. Where could have Malar gone? Both of them pondered over the same question. After two minutes, Sagar's eyes fell on the key stand next to the house's entry door. There were four hooks in the key stand, and only one hook was empty. He went closer and realized something.

"Shit, the terrace key is missing!" Sagar shouted.

Sai and Sagar looked into each other's eyes, and they feared that their worst fears might come true. They both ran towards the fourth floor at 4:10 pm.

***

Malar entered the terrace, and the sunlight hit her directly. The emptiness of the terrace made her feel emptier. She walked towards the edge wall of the terrace and stopped taking the support of the wall. The edge wall reached up to her chest. She looked down and saw auto-rickshaws, cars, bikes, and people were moving and crossing the road.

She recalled how she had met Harsh on the terrace for the first time. She realized how many important things and events of her life had happened on

the same terrace and how everything was about to end at the same place. She looked up at the sky and thought, "Will I go up there after everything is over?"

"I hope my mother and Sagar will accept everything and move on in life," she thought.

Tears rolled down her eyes. "I would have lived more, but the pain is unbearable, and I can't destroy the people around me anymore."

She got up and stood on the edge wall of the terrace. From there, she looked down. "Only four floors of flying and hopefully things will get better".

"I think I will finally meet my father up there. I will hug him super tight and will complain to him about how he was not there when I needed him the most."

She looked up for one last time, "Papa, I am coming," She said to herself and closed her eyes.

***

Sagar and Sai reached the terrace. Sagar saw Malar standing on the edge wall and looking towards the sky.

He heard her saying, "Papa, I am coming."

Sagar ran towards her, and before she could jump, he pulled her hand with an unimaginable force. Malar lost balance and fell.

Not towards the roadside but thankfully where Sagar was standing. Sai ran and helped her stand up. Malar was crying. She didn't know what had just happened. It felt as if someone had woken her up from a bad dream.

Sagar slapped her very hard. He transformed all his anger and pain for her into that anger. By now, he and Sai were also crying.

Sagar shouted while crying, " Bhenchod, what the fuck you think you were trying to do?"

By now, Malar had lost her control. She didn't even recognize Sagar and Sai. Her head started to spin. Her stomach churned, and she puked again, this time on Sagar, and then losing her balance, she passed out.

Chapter 36

Harsh reached Mumbai with anger raging in his blood. He had never expected such a betrayal from his father. That too just for money. He also realized that his father had emotionally manipulated him since the beginning.

He reached his house. His father opened the door with a smile, "Welcome, beta," he said. Harsh saw how fake his smile was and how good he had acted up to that point.

Harsh realized that his mother was not in the house. It was the perfect moment to confront his father.

"Harsh, see this. Your father in law has sent me the list of the food items which they are going to keep in your marriage feast."

Harsh shouted, "Why did you lie to me about Aayushi?"

Harsh's father realized that there was no looking back. He had to play his Trump card. He said

"Because I cared for you and your future."

"Don't give me that shit! You lied to me and sold me to Khushboo's family just for money." Harsh shouted again. Anger took over him.

"What would you have done marrying Aayushi? Her father didn't even have his own house. You would have struggled the whole life if you had married her. Look at me. I made the same mistake marrying your mother as her father was not rich. I had to work hard day and night to give you everything. And now, with Khushboo, your future is set. You wouldn't have to think about money ever." This time Harsh's father also spoke in a loud tone.

Harsh couldn't believe how narrow-minded and misogynistic his father was. Harsh gave it back to him, saying, "What about love?"

His father laughed sarcastically. He said, "Beta, your mother is not around; that's why I am saying it. So listen very carefully. Love is only valid until you sleep with the girl. Afterwards, it's all about doing it again and again. And to have great sex, you should have money, lots of it. You will experience it all when you go for a honeymoon with Khushboo."

Harsh felt like slapping his father. For him, he had been a good person. He had never realized that his father was so evil and cunning. He hated to call him his father. He was someone else. Someone who was blinded by the desire to have free money, name, and power.
Harsh revolted in a soft voice, "I can't marry Khushboo. I will not! No matter what! I love someone else, and she is not from our stupid, fucked up, and brainwashed samaj. And I will marry her. If you don't allow me, I will leave this house now itself. I don't care about your respect in this samaj anymore."

Harsh's father was stunned. His son was out of his control now. Everything he had dreamed of flashed in front of his eyes. The dream of having lots of money, power, authority, and respect in the samaj started to break. He couldn't let it happen. It was just a matter of 15 days. Once the marriage had taken place, nothing could be done. He knew how to control his son. He took a deep breath and said, "Okay, do whatever you want to do. Let your mother come. Then we will decide."
Harsh's father started walking back towards his room. Harsh was still furious. He shouted, "And yes, I already had sex with the girl I love, and you can never know how much I love her because this samaj of yours has made you lose your humanity."

***

After an hour and a half, Harsh's mother came back home. His father had already called and informed her about what their son was up to.

Harsh was inside his room, sleeping. The events of the entire day had made him tired. He didn't even know when his phone got switched off.

His mother entered his room, carrying a cup of tea. She ran her hand over Harsh's hair and slowly woke him up; he got up and hugged his mother.
"Mummy, I can't marry Khushboo. I love someone else. Please, mummy."
"Okay, beta. We will do something about it. First, get up and drink this tea. I made it for you."

Mothers can make their children calm and peaceful at any given moment. Harsh got up and took the first sip of the tea; it tasted good. He loved whatever his mother made for him. After taking a few sips, Harsh's eyes started to become heavy. His vision started to get blurred. His head spun, and he passed out.

His mother took the cup of tea from his hand. She had tears in her eyes, but she had to follow her husband's order. Harsh's father entered the room. He first took Harsh's phone and kept it inside his pocket. Then he called his family doctor.
"I can't see my son in such a condition. We are his parents. How can we do such things to him?" Harsh's mother cried.
"It is for his betterment. We have to lock him up for the next 15 days. We will secretly take him to Surat and marry him off. I think this is the only way. Don't you remember? Your father also locked you up before our marriage because you wanted to marry that bastard, Abdul. Your son has inherited all your traits, you bitch! I ruined my life by marrying you, and I can't let it happen again." Harsh's father was angry. His wife didn't dare to speak in front of him.

Soon the doctor arrived and injected Harsh with medicine. He also taught his father how to inject the medicine and gave him around 30 injections. He instructed him to give Harsh an injection every 12 hours. He was told to wake up Harsh to only give him food and water. Harsh's father gave the doctor 10 thousand rupees. Then, he took the unconscious Harsh, made him lie inside the car, and took him to an unknown location in Mumbai.

Chapter 37

13 DAYS LEFT FOR THE WEDDING.
INSIDE THE HOSPITAL ROOM.

Since the last two days after the suicide attempt at the terrace, Malar had been resting in the private ward. Sagar and Sai brought her to the hospital and admitted her. The doctors conducted tests on her and realized that all her vitals, like blood pressure and heart rate, had gone haywire. Her thyroid levels were at an all-time high, and she also had fever. They didn't have any other option but to admit her and conduct all the required tests.

Sagar informed Malar's mom about how she had passed out, but he hadn't told her that her daughter had tried to end her life.

While all this time, between running here and there, Sagar felt like crying, and whenever he cried, Sai was there to hold him. He always said to her, "What would have happened if I had reached even a second late."
Sai would just be there to comfort him. He tried calling Harsh, but his phone was switched off. Dr. Meera came to check on Malar that day. Sagar was very happy to see her. He gave her all the reports, and they both entered the hospital room together. Malar was sleeping, and her mother was sitting next to her on the bed.
Dr. Meera slowly woke up Malar. She said in a positive and cheerful voice, "Hey, beautiful! Wake up."
It took some time for Malar to realize that it was Dr. Meera. She just smiled and said, "I am Okay."
"It looks like you lost some of your vitamins and minerals in the last few days. Don't worry. You are looking fine now. I will insist they discharge you today." Dr. Meera said as if she was giving a motivational speech.
Malar just managed to thank her. But she did not make any eye contact with Sagar.
Dr. Meera replied, "But tomorrow you have to come to my clinic because we need to discuss a few things." Malar nodded.

Sagar and Dr. Meera left the room. On the recommendation of Dr. Meera, Malar was discharged that evening itself. Sai, Sagar, and her mother brought her back to her house.

Finally, she and Sagar looked at each other. Sagar couldn't stop his tears, and they both just hugged. It was the kind of hug which could even solve the messiest of problems. It was the kind of hug which could make a dead plant grow again.
Sagar said while crying, "Malar, you can't even imagine what would have happened to me if something had happened to you. I am sorry that I slapped you." Watching them, Sai and Malar's mother also started to cry.
Malar cried and said, "I am sorry."
She looked towards her mom and said, "Mummy, that day, I went to the terrace to jump and finish everything. But Sagar saved me. I know he didn't tell you about this, but that's the reality. He saved me."

Malar's mother couldn't believe what she was hearing. Tears were flowing down her eyes, and she felt thankful to Sagar and the universe for saving her daughter. Malar hugged her.

"Mom, I promise that I will never try to do such things again. I am sorry. I became so obsessed with a person that I never realized I have so many people to love me."
This time Sai said with moist eyes, "That day we came to inform you about that person. Indirectly or directly, that person was the reason we could save you." Sai believed that Malar deserved to know the truth.
Malar looked at her and said, "Sai, please, I don't want to talk about it. I might be broken, but I will fight. But I don't want to know anything about that person."
Sagar signaled Sai with his eyes. She said, "okay."

That day all of them had dinner together, and Sagar cracked some terrible jokes to make Malar laugh.
He cracked a bad joke saying, "Tell me, what does Steve Jobs calls his parents?"
No one knew the answer. Sagar answered it, saying, "I Baba," he laughed loudly to his own joke. Sai and Malar looked at each and again broke out laughing. Sagar felt he had achieved everything when he saw Malar smiling again.

12 DAYS TO GO FOR THE WEDDING.
INSIDE DR. MEERA'S CLINIC

Sagar and Malar entered Dr. Meera's clinic. Malar was wearing a blue kurti with white leggings. Sagar looked dapper in a white shirt and blue denim; they both arrived on Sagar's Avenger Bike.

Dr. Meera welcomed them with a warm smile. She looked radiant in her mustard color kurti and black denim.
Sagar and Malar took the seats in front of Dr. Meera.
"So what's up? How are you feeling now, Malar?"
"I am feeling better than yesterday."
"So, how did this happen?" Dr. Meera asked.
Malar felt uncomfortable listening to that question. She looked at Sagar. Dr. Meera understood Malar's discomfort and said
"It is okay. You don't have to answer if you feel uncomfortable."
Malar managed to say, "I had a breakup last month. The guy left me, and I loved him a lot, and that led me to kill myself." Sagar held her hand to comfort her.

Dr. Meera took a deep breath and said, "Okay, now listen to me very carefully." Malar nodded.
Dr. Meera continued, "Malar, I went through your reports, and the reason behind your continuous puking was not just depression or thyroid. It was because you are Pregnant."
Things went blank after Malar heard Dr. Meera's words. Sagar didn't know what to do. Things looked complicated after that revelation.
Dr. Meera gave some water to Malar. She said, "See, it's difficult to conceive when you have thyroid. But now that you are pregnant, the next nine months will be challenging because your thyroid levels are at an all-time high. You have to decide now. If you want to abort, you can tell me within a week."
Malar didn't know what to say. She felt happy and anxious at the same time. Without thinking much, she said to Dr. Meera.
"I will abort," Malar said and got up to leave.
Sagar followed her. He called her out and said, "Malar wait, there is something I need to tell you. Please listen."
Malar stopped and turned towards Sagar. She couldn't believe that there was a life growing inside her. Sagar said, "That day when I came on the terrace, it was to inform you that I had received a call from Khushboo, Harsh' fiancé."

Sagar told her everything that Khushboo had said. He said, "Malar, Harsh is ready to fight for your love. We just need to help him. He is weak, but he is not a coward for sure." He took out his phone and called Khushboo.
"Hey, Khushboo! Sagar this side."
"Hi! Did you have a word with Harsh?"
"No. Actually, I want you to have a word with Malar, please."
Malar took the phone. Khushboo said, "Hi, Malar. After what happened between you and Harsh at Hampi, you might think that Harsh is a coward or that he has cheated on you, but no, he loves you a lot. He has suffered enough in the last one month. I want you to marry him, and I will make sure that happens. His love for you is true."
Tears flowed down Malar's eyes while listening to Khushboo's words. She just managed to thank her.
Sagar said, "Malar, what happened should not have happened, but Harsh's upbringing and his samaj have made him a little weak and fearful. But he is

ready to take charge now. In all the movies and wherever we see around, it's always a boy who fights with the girl's parents, but this time the girl has to fight, and everyone is with us."

Malar knew what she had to do. A few days back, she was ready to die, but now she had a reason to live. Her child, who was growing inside her, gave her strength. She hugged Sagar and ran towards Dr. Meera's cabin. Once inside, she said, "I will keep the baby."

Dr. Meera looked at her and said, "The pregnancy will be tough. You have to fight. Are you ready?"

Malar said with a smile, "I have seen worse things like attempting suicide. So now, every pain looks bearable. I will do it."

From Dr. Meera's clinic, Sagar and Malar reached their building. Malar first went and told her mother that she was pregnant. Her mother was shocked, but she was silent. After some time, she hugged her daughter. Malar also told her everything about Harsh and how his fiancé was ready to help them.

Her mom said, "Beta things will get tougher. Some battles are to be fought alone. I can't see you go through everything again."

Malar asked, "Mom, do you believe in me?"

"Yes, beta, always."

"Then trust me. In the next 15 days, everything would come back to normal."

How fragile love and human beings are! A person who was hell-bent on ending her life a few days back had changed completely when she got to know the truth.

That's what love does to us. Either it destroys us entirely or gives us a purpose in life.

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Sagar called Khushboo again the same day.

"Did you get any news from Harsh after that day?" He asked.

Khushboo answered, "No, his phone has been switched off ever since that day. I am sure things are very fishy at his house. His father is a wicked man, Sagar. Do one thing. Go to his house and enquire about him. See what his father says"

"Okay. I will call you soon," Sagar told Khushboo.

Sagar and Sai went to Harsh's house after the call. Sai stood downstairs, and Sagar went up to his house. He rang the bell.
After a few seconds, Harsh's father opened the door.
"Hello, Beta! Long time! How are you?"
Sagar acted normally and said
"Uncle, is Harsh there? His phone is switched off. I wanted to talk to him regarding a reunion at our school."
Harsh's father smiled. "Yes, of course! His phone is switched off. See, here is his phone," his father showed the phone to Sagar.
Sagar was surprised to see it. He asked, "Where is he uncle?"
Harsh's father looked directly into Sagar's eyes and smiled. He said, "Beta, he is getting married in the next 10 days. Two days back, he went with the Mahasaheb of our samaj to Gujarat. There he will stay like a sadhu for a week and fast. He has been very spiritual since childhood, so he wanted to live like a sadhu before marriage because afterward, it won't be possible."
Sagar understood that his father was clearly making up a story so apt that no one could question him.
"When will he come back, uncle?"
"Oh. He will directly reach Surat two days before his marriage."

Sagar left the house and realized that things were more challenging than they looked. He and Sai reached Malar's house and called Khushboo. He kept the phone on loudspeaker and told her the story that Harsh's father had narrated to him.
Khushboo said, "Fuck! This man is a fucking mastermind! He might have surely locked up Harsh somewhere, and no one can question his story because these Mahasahebs or sadhus don't have a fixed location, and that's why no one can ask him where Harsh exactly is. Fucker!"
Malar was worried. So were Sagar and Sai. It was a fucked up and helpless situation. Sagar suggested, "Should I follow him?"
Khushboo said, "No, that would be too risky because if he gets doubtful, things would become worse.
Malar asked, "Khushboo, can't you do anything? Through your father or anyone?
Khushboo said, "He will narrate the same story to my father, and my father would appreciate Harsh on the whole spiritual angle. Our samaj is way more messed up than you think it is, Malar."

Khushboo knew that there was only one option now. She took a deep breath and said, "We have to do the unthinkable. You guys have to come and pick up Harsh directly from the wedding."
Sagar asked, "As in?"
Khushboo said, "Matlab uthana padega. Pick him up the way it happens in movies."
Malar asked, "How?"
Khushboo said, "Listen to me very carefully…"

Chapter 38

THREE DAYS BEFORE MARRIAGE

The last nine days went into planning a lot of things. It felt as if Sagar, Malar, Sai, and Khushboo were on a secret mission to save the world.

The most nervous and scared was Malar because everything that mattered to her depended on their actions of these two days.

Step by step, things were planned and rehearsed. Malar practiced her speech over a hundred times in front of the mirror as she had to give her best shot. Sagar and Sai took care of the communication, travel arrangements, and some legal matters. Malar's mom was also instructed about her duties.

Khushboo was the leader of the whole plan, and Malar felt she was the unsung hero of her story.

She even asked her, "Why are you doing so much for me?"

She replied in her swag, "Despite having so much, I always felt like a loser in life. That's what my samaj does to a lot of girls, but I have the chance to be a hero for the first time in my life. I can't let it go."

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Sagar called Khushboo just before leaving for Surat. "We are all set to leave."

Khushboo said, "Wait. Don't leave today. Harsh's father called and informed that he and his family would reach tomorrow, not today. The reason they gave was that Harsh would reach Surat directly."

Sagar said, "I think they want to spend less time at the wedding and finish it off very fast."

"I think so…"

The nervousness and fear reached the next level after the delay. Sagar and Sai advised Malar to sleep because the stress was not good for her and the baby. But, that night, no one slept. All three of them lay down on Malar's bed and talked about their future.

Sagar asked, "What will the baby call me? I hope he doesn't give bad words to me once he or she grows up."

Malar smiled and said, “He or she will call you, mama. The best mama in the whole world!”
Sai asked, “But why would the baby give you bad words, Sagar? Matlab Kuch bhi?”
Sagar explained, “I will teach your kid the best abusive words. I fear that the baby doesn’t use them back on me.”
Malar said, “I will beat the shit out of you if you use any bad words in front of my baby.”
Sagar then winked at Sai and asked Malar, “By the way, Malar, which position did you and Harsh make love in? I did not know that some positions had such a success rate.”
Malar felt shy and kicked Sagar. Sai and Sagar laughed out loud. After a long time, things looked hopeful.

TWO DAYS BEFORE THE MARRIAGE

The next morning Sagar, Malar, and Sai left for Surat in Sagar’s Ertiga. Malar drove the car. She had learned it way back when she had turned eighteen and acquired her driving license.

But in the last 10 days, she practiced her driving skills and became confident in it.

They reached Surat at 12 pm and checked themselves inside a decent three-star hotel situated close to the Banquet hall and resort where the marriage and other functions were going to be held. They went through the plan once again and waited for Khushboo to call.
Around 2 pm, Khushboo called, “Harsh and his family just arrived.”
Sagar, Sai, and Malar got very excited. Finally, Malar asked, “Did you see him?”
Khushboo said, “Unfortunately not. I am stuck here at my house as some functions are going on. But my father saw him. He said that Harsh looked very weak and sleepy. Harsh’s father said that it was because of the fasting. He told my father that Harsh would rest the whole day inside his room and would directly come out tomorrow as his health is not good.”
“Shit! What if he doesn’t come out tomorrow also? His father can make up some other story and bring him out directly on the marriage day. Our plan will fail miserably.” Sagar was tensed.
“No, don’t worry. Tomorrow is sangeet, and my dance performance is scheduled. So I will throw a tantrum to my father that if Harsh doesn’t see

my performance, I would not get married. I know my father. He will listen to me." Khushboo really had some plans under her belt.
Sagar, Malar, and Sai managed to accept Khushboo's idea.

That night Sai went inside the resort to supervise the location where the groom's family was staying. The resort was spread over a big property, and the distance between the Banquet hall and all the rooms were situated at a walking distance of seven to eight minutes.

Sai saw Harsh's father supervising things and also some other relatives roaming around. She tried very hard but failed to find out the location of Harsh or his father's room.

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That night they all had a word with Khushboo. She explained, "Okay, guys, the day of action has finally come. Tomorrow the sangeet function will start at 8 pm, and my performance is scheduled at 9 pm. So we have one hour to do everything. We would all be wearing an earpiece that I will send to your hotel tomorrow, to be connected with each other. Don't panic. Let's do this shit."
Sagar clapped hard and said, "I think you are a big fan of Captain America."
Khushboo laughed and said, "No, I think I am Captain Marvel myself," and hung up the call.

ONE DAY BEFORE THE WEDDING.

At 8 pm, Sai and Malar entered the resort in their Ertiga. They parked the car and entered the Banquet hall wearing traditional Chaniya cholis. They both looked like the perfect bridesmaids. They went straight inside Khushboo's room, where she was getting ready. Malar hugged Khushboo and once again thanked her with all her heart.
Khushboo pulled her leg, saying, "Now, don't thank me much. I might change my mind and get married to your cute boyfriend, who also happens to be the father of your child. Congrats, by the way."
Malar smiled. Sai also introduced herself to Khushboo.
After the pleasantries, Malar asked, "Did you come to know about Harsh's room no.?"
Khushboo said, "No, but her mother has the keys to his room. Since yesterday she is the one who is taking separate breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

So it’s common sense that it is for Harsh. I think they have drugged him so that he is just sleeping the whole time. Bloody bastards.”
“So, what should we do now?” Malar asked.
“Just 10 minutes before my performance, I will ask Harsh’s father to call him, and at the same time, you will go and play your part in front of Harsh’s father, and Sagar will play his game there on…”
Malar took a deep breath and said, “Okay.”

10 MINUTES BEFORE KHUSHBOO’S PERFORMANCE

Khushboo went to Harsh’s father, “Papa, where is Harsh? My performance is about to begin. Please tell him to come fast,” she said furiously.
“Beta, he is still not well. He told me he couldn’t come because he wanted to be perfectly fit for tomorrow.”
“No, papa! I will not dance without him. Please call him now; otherwise, I will not get married. My father might have also told you about this in the morning. I want my husband to be with me. What kind of marriage is this? Where is the groom? Are you calling him, or should I call my father?”
Khushboo took charge with complete domination.
Harsh’s father feared that she would stop the wedding in real life. He gave in, took out his mobile phone, and called Harsh’s mother, “Bring Harsh down in 10 minutes. Make sure he looks decent.”
Harsh’s mother said, “You also come with me. I can’t do everything alone.”
“Okay, I am coming.”
Harsh’s father started to walk towards Harsh’s room from the Banquet hall, and that’s when Malar and Sai appeared and stood in front of him.
Malar said, “Hello, uncle!”

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Sagar entered the resort wearing a smart black tuxedo. His job was to spot Harsh’s mother and follow her. After some effort, he spotted her and followed her. She reached outside the room and was about to open it. That’s when Sagar said, “Aunty, wait! Uncle sent me over here to tell you that some girl has come and she is saying that Harsh loves her and that she wants to marry him. Aunty, she is insulting uncle a lot in front of everyone. Go, fast, aunty! Uncle needs you. Don’t worry! Give me the key. I will bring Harsh.”

In a state of shock, Harsh’s mother gave the key to Sagar and ran to save her husband’s reputation.

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Harsh’s father said, “Hello, Beta! I don't recognize you?”
Malar started her speech, “Uncle, I am the girl who Harsh loves. He might have told you about me.”
Harsh’s father was shocked, and fear took over him. He said, “I don’t know any such thing. Please excuse me.”
“Arre wait, uncle! Let me tell you something,” Malar said.
At the same time, Khushboo signaled the D.J to stop the music.
Malar continued very loudly, “Uncle, I love Harsh, and he also loves me a lot.” Many people in the crowd, including Khushboo’s father, looked towards them.
“But you are trying to stop our marriage. First, you didn’t let Harsh marry Aayushi because she had lesser money than you, and now you want him to marry Khushboo because her father is rich, and you will get a lot of money and gold as dowry. Oh! I am sorry, it would be given to Khushboo, but after marriage, it will come to your house.”
Harsh’s father lost his shit. He said, “Shut the fuck up! I will destroy you forever.”
Malar laughed. “I am already destroyed a lot, uncle! Let me tell you that your son and I went on a trip. He didn’t tell you about it, but he came with me. And we celebrated our honeymoon there, even before marriage. And now guess what? I am pregnant with your son’s child. Congrats, uncle! You are going to become a Grandfather.”
Harsh’s father lost his control and sanity. He shouted, “Sluts like you can go to any extent for money,” he charged towards Malar to slap her, and that’s when Khushboo came in between to stop him.
Malar shouted, “Uncle, you are so scared by me that you want to stop me by beating me. But you cannot stop me from marrying your son!”

After saying this, Malar and Sai left the Banquet hall with the confidence to kill. Everyone, including Khushboo and her father, created a ruckus around Harsh’s father. Everyone had questions, but Harsh’s father had no answers. He had turned deaf and dumb. He knew he had lost the battle.

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Sagar opened the door and found Harsh in a pitiable state. He was tied to a chair and was half unconscious. He tried to wake him up by slapping him, but he was unsuccessful. He untied him and helped him stand up. He was losing his balance and couldn't walk. The problem that loomed over Sagar was that he knew he wouldn't be able to single-handedly carry Harsh to the parking lot.

He saw a bellboy passing by. He called him "Bhaiya, my friend had a lot of alcohol sometime back. I need to take him to the doctor. Can you help me in carrying him to the car?"

The bellboy agreed; he and Sagar carried Harsh towards the car. Malar and Sai were already waiting inside the car. Sagar made Harsh sit on the back seat and gave Rs. 500 to the bellboy as a tip. He left feeling jubilant.

Malar felt like she had got her heart back the moment she saw Harsh. Sagar sat inside the car and said, "Let's go."

Malar accelerated, and there they left Surat forever. After five minutes, the bellboy realized that alcohol was banned in Gujarat. He knew that he had been fooled by Sagar.

Chapter 39

THE WEDDING DAY

What is so fascinating about a person that we are ready to go to any extent to be with him?

To be honest, there is no sure shot answer to this, but when Malar was asked this, she said, "Being with Harsh was worth living for because without him, I was ready to die."

That day Khushboo's and Harsh's wedding got canceled. Khushboo started to cry after Malar left the Banquet hall. She started to cry to gain emotional sympathy from the crowd. Though her acting was terrible, the plan worked out.

Khushboo's father got angry and called off the marriage. The entire samaj insulted Harsh's mom and dad, and with no option left, they had to leave the resort that night itself.

But Harsh's father got the biggest shock of his life when he couldn't find Harsh inside his room. He got furious and started throwing things around. He even slapped his wife, accusing her of letting his son run away.
On the other hand, the entire team of Sai, Sagar, Malar, with Harsh still unconscious, entered Mumbai at around 4 am in the morning.

Malar drove the car, but more than just driving, it was her liberation from the shackles of pain, bondage, and fear towards love.

They reached their building, and everyone carried Harsh inside Malar's house. Her mother was delighted to see them and was happy that they had successfully carried out their mission.

They made Harsh lie down on the bed inside Malar's room, and her mother made piping hot tea for everyone. Now began the most important part of their plan - the wedding.

Harsh woke up and regained his consciousness in the morning around 8 am. The first thing he saw was Malar smiling. He thought he was dreaming. Yes, it was a dream, but a dream which had turned into reality. Harsh also smiled back, and Malar couldn't hold herself back. She got on top of the bed and hugged him. A hug that melted all the pain that Harsh had faced in the last 10 days. Then Sagar explained to him how they had picked him up

from his own wedding and asked him about his whereabouts in the last 10 days.
Harsh drank some water and spoke, "My father gave me some injections and took me to an unknown location where he tied me inside a room. There they would give me food and then again inject me, which would make me unconscious."
He showed his swollen area above his right hip, where he was injected. That part had turned bluish-black. Malar couldn't hold back her tears on seeing it. She kissed Harsh and said, "I am sorry."
Harsh looked into her eyes and said, "I can even die to be with you. Thank you for making me run away from my wedding."
Sagar and Sai broke out laughing, looking at the couple, sharing a sweet moment.
Harsh asked, "Now what?"
Sagar looked at Malar, and everyone around and with a smile said, "You and Malar are getting married today."
"What? Where?" Harsh had never dreamed of all his dreams coming true on the same day.
"Today at the Arya Samaj Temple, Goregaon. It's the only place where you guys can marry legally, today itself." Sagar explained
"What is Arya Samaj?" Harsh had never heard the name before in his life.
"Aree bhai! I will explain everything to you. First, you get ready. We have to leave soon."
"But what will I wear?" Harsh asked.
"See this! We have made sure that our Dulha looks smart," Sai said, showing him the sherwani which they had bought during the last 10 days of their planning. They also bought a very heavy maroon chaniya choli for Malar.

Harsh, Sagar, Sai, Malar, and her mother got ready for the wedding.

All of them got inside the car. Malar drove, and Harsh sat next to her. He felt safe and secure, sitting beside her. During their journey to Goregaon, Sagar explained to Harsh that it was very important for them to get married that day before his father could create more problems for him.

So after some research, he found out that Arya Samaj Marriage was the fastest way to get the legal marriage certificate that day itself. If the boy is above 21 and the girl is above 18, Arya Samaj doesn't ask any questions and

directly starts the process of marriage. Sagar also said that he had already booked a pandit for the marriage.

Harsh laughed, thinking how there existed his samaj where people in love were not allowed to marry, and then there was some Arya Samaj that helped people from different religions to get married with no questions asked.

Soon they all reached the Arya Samaj Mandir, Goregaon. Harsh and Malar entered the place holding hands. Sai, Sagar, and Malar's mom followed them.

Sai looked very beautiful in her South Indian white silk saree. Sagar looked cute in his dark green kurta and cream color South Indian lungi; Sai had thought about making him wear a lungi. Malar's mom looked elegant and rich in her red saree.

The pandit started all the rituals. First, Malar and Harsh exchanged the varmalas, then they exchanged rings that were brought by Malar's mom.

Next, they sat in front of the holy and divine fire. The pandit started chanting the mantras. Malar's mother gave Harsh the Mangalsutra.

Looking into Malar's eyes, which were in tears now, Harsh tied the Mangalsutra around Malar's neck.

They both had finally found their universe in each other. The seven pheras started, and in that moment, space and time ceased to exist. There were no two people; everything was just one.

It felt as if all the lovers in the entire universe were getting united forever. It felt as if it had finally rained in the desert. It felt as if the light of the sun had finally fallen on the moon. It felt as if life had met love.

Malar and Harsh were officially married now. Sagar clicked a lot of pictures of them. In a photo, Malar kissed Harsh on his cheek and softly said in his ear, "I can't wait to make love to you," Harsh blushed.

From there, the four of them went to have lunch at the Maharaja Bhog inside Oberoi Mall.

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That evening, Malar took Harsh to the place where their story had started.

The sky had turned orange. The sun was about to set, and all the birds were singing. Time had stopped for both Malar and Harsh. They couldn't

believe that they were finally husband and wife. The impossible was reality now. They sat on the water tank, next to each other, holding hands.
Malar spoke, looking at the sky. "Harsh, do you know that I was about to take my life by jumping off from this terrace, but Sagar saved me. How stupid I was! I never realized it was you who needed my help and support."
Harsh looked into her eyes and held Malar. He said, "We both went through so much but what we have now is bigger than all the pain in this world. I love you. Thanks for coming back into my life and uplifting me from all the pain."
Malar smiled, came close to Harsh's face, kissed him hard, and spoke, "You are going to be a father."
The sun had set, smiling.

EPILOGUE

FIVE MONTHS LATER

Harsh and Malar left for their 10 days babymoon to Bali. By now, Malar's baby bump was visibly big. Dr. Meera finally gave her permission to travel. In those five months, Malar joined her job back.

She and Harsh also renovated their bedroom. Making a home with your life partner is the best experience ever. Harsh was jobless for a month after marriage. He couldn't go to his business again because it was connected to his father.

Malar suggested he work at a gym as a trainer because he had a good knowledge of exercises and workouts.

Soon after some interviews, Harsh got a job as a personal trainer in the gym where he and Malar used to work out.

For safety purposes, Harsh also lodged an F.I.R. in the nearby police station against his father as he had kept him trapped for 10 days and mentally and physically harassed him.

At times Harsh felt heartbroken as his own parents had treated him like a toy. During those times, Malar and her mother loved him and made him feel at home.

Harsh's father and mother couldn't face the insult they had faced in their samaj. They both left Mumbai and shifted to Gujarat without letting anyone know their location.

On the other end, the self-made hero of the story, Khushboo, was on top of the world after her wedding got canceled. She acted depressed in front of her father for a few days. Then when her father asked her what she wanted, she took his credit card and left for a solo trip around the world. She also started her Instagram handle, where she worked as a travel and lifestyle influencer. She finally got to live life on her own terms.

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On one regular Friday, Sai and Sagar met at a small garden in Malad(East). They had wanted to meet for a long time, but Sai was busy with her Hampi trips. Finally, she came for a walk in the garden.
Sai asked, "So, what's up?"

Sagar replied, "Nothing much. You say, how was your last tour to Hampi?" He felt nervous.
Sai answered, "It was good. You wanted to say something? You messaged me that you needed to discuss something important."
"Can we sit and talk?" Sagar asked.
"Yes, sure."

They both sat on the empty bench in the garden. It was evening, and many people were roaming around. Sagar gathered his courage and started to speak.
"Sai, do you remember that in Hampi when we were inside my room, you had asked me if I have ever been in true love? I didn't have an answer at that time. But with time, the question stayed inside me, and in the last five months, I realized that I really like someone."
"Oh, wow! Who is the lucky girl?" Sai asked happily.
"It's you," Sagar was shit nervous by now.
"Haha, that came as a shock," Sai laughed.
"Sai, I don't know whether I like or love, you know, but whatever it is when I am with you, I feel exceptional. All our walks, movie nights, and the trip to Hampi are significant to me. So yes, I like you." Sai realized by Sagar's tone that he was dead serious about what he was speaking.
"Sagar, to be honest, I have never thought about it. I love to spend time with you, and you are my best friend. Now that doesn't mean I am friend-zoning you. It's just that this came as a shock to me."
Sagar became quiet. He said, "Okay."
Sai didn't want Sagar to feel bad or guilty. She really liked it when Sagar expressed how he felt for her. She explained to him.
"Look, Sagar, love, and relationship are two different things. Now, if we don't come into a relationship, that doesn't mean you will stop loving me. See you have your goals, and I am working on my travel company. If we come into a relationship and by chance, if I am unable to give you time, you will feel bad about it, and that will create conflicts between us. So it is better we keep friendship as the relationship between us and let love take over between us."
Sagar didn't understand what Sai was trying to say. He asked, "So you mean to say that I can love you without being in a relationship?"
"Yes, what's wrong with that? Things will continue as they are going on. We will meet, eat, and watch movies. But we will not bind ourselves in the

name of boyfriend and girlfriend."
Sagar said, "Okay, Sai, thanks for understanding."
They both became silent. Afterwards, soon, Sagar recalled something. He opened his bag and took out two diaries from it. "Sai, I need your help. I have written a story in this diary. Can you read it and tell me how it is?"
"Oh, wow! I will surely read them, Sagar. So cool! By the way, what is it about?" Sai was happy. She immediately took both the diaries from Sagar's hand.
"You will come to know when you will read them."
When Sai completed reading the diaries in the next few days, she realized that it was Sagar's, Malar's, Harsh's, and her story.

THE END.

Small Request to all My Readers…!!!

First of all, If you are reading this then I am pretty sure that you all have finished reading the book and it means a lot to me.

But I just want a small thing from you all.
Firstly, if you have not connected with me on Social Media then please do connect on Instagram, Facebook and Telegram because I want to talk with you and also want to know what do you guys think about the book.

Secondly, Please Share your Reviews about this book, everywhere. Go on my website, www.wearethereforeachother.com and share your reviews. Go on Amazon and Share your Reviews. Also, Tag me @sagarkibaatein on Instagram and share your Reviews there, also please tell all your friends about this book and encourage everyone to read it because You guys are my true asset. Only with your support this book can reach to more people and that's what every artist wants. In Short, just spread the Word. Shor Maccha do Apni Book ka, kyuki yeh book ab sirf MERI nai, appki bhi Hain.

Lastly, Mail me personally on sagarchudesara@gmail.com . Share with me, what do you think about the story, the characters and the ending..?
Which character was your favourite..?
And lastly your genuine Feedback.
I will personally reply or Call to each and everyone. That's my Promise.

Until the Next Book,
Keep Reading, Keep Loving, Keep Fighting,
Yours Truly,
Sagar Chudesara

Can Malar Become the Hero of Her Love Story..?

Four People, Their Ultimate Fight for LOVE..!

Sagar and Malar are Childhood Friends who grew up together in the Same Building of Malad East, Mumbai. They share a deep and honest Relationship where there is no Judgement and No one knows them better than EACH OTHER.

Their Life is going good when Malar faces the Biggest and Life Threatening Problem of her Life which could destroy her Self Existence forever. Sagar Supports Malar in such tough times and as they Tackle Life together, Their Circle of Friendship is Widened with the Entry of Two New People - Harsh and Sai.

The Four Embark on a Breathtaking Road Trip to Hampi, Karnataka to find answers to their Problems and also to find Love. This Journey changes the dynamics of their Relationship,Challenges their Love and Friendship, Questions their Choices and Will Change their Life Forever. Will they Survive the Storm..?

"We are There for Each other" is a Raw, Honest and Inspiring Love Story of Human Emotions, Healing, Fighting against Religion, Travel and also about being there for each other in the Toughest of Situations, No Matter What..! The Story will leave you fulfilled when you finish reading the last page.

Paper Publication
Publishing Dreams...
ISBN 978-93-90465-01-9
9 789390 465019
₹390
www.paperpublication.in